MY HAPPY MARRIAGE
AKUMI AGITOGI
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MY HAPPY MARRIAGE

2

Akumi Agitogi

Illustration by
Tsukiho Tsukioka

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AKUMI AGITOGI

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PROLOGUE

Harsh sunlight beat down on him, scorching his skin.

The imperial capital, crowded with large, modern buildings, was already sweltering enough. But when he looked at the fluttering heat haze coming off the pavement, he felt even more sickened from the weather.

With his sweaty shirt clinging uncomfortably to his skin, Arata turned his gaze forward.

A white parasol… Is that her?

Ahead of him stood a young woman holding a parasol, wrapped in a summery kimono with a pretty fringed pink flower pattern over its cool white-and-blue fabric. From her extremely pale face, which looked as though it could collapse at any moment, Arata knew that she was the person he was looking for.

That being said, he didn't have any particular business with her this instant; he'd simply wanted to get a glimpse of the girl—Miyo Saimori—whom he had heard so much about.

There wasn't much sense in scoping her out, as no matter what sort of person she may have been, it didn't change their plans whatsoever. This was a simple act of curiosity, nothing more.

After all that anticipation. But as long as I have my mission, that's enough for me.

What was important was the human who possessed the Gift herself. That and the duty given to him and his family, their fervent wish.

Instead of considering what sort of person this Miyo Saimori was, he hoped her personality wouldn't prove to be a nuisance, and he was simply coming to confirm this for himself.

At any rate…

She looks pretty normal, I'd say. Plain, even. Kind of gloomy, though.

Any drearier and she'd look like a ghost. He'd heard that her betrothal to the head of the Kudou family had started to transform her, both internally and externally, but he could see no signs of this.

He sighed in dejection. Suddenly, the woman lost her balance as she walked over in his direction.

She was going to fall.

In spite of his cold feelings of apathy, Arata half-heartedly extended his arms.

"Whoa there."

He sounded utterly shameless as he feigned coincidence.

Now collapsed in his arms, the woman didn't betray his first impression—she was quite slender and light. Little wonder her stamina would give out just from standing underneath the blazing sun.

"M-my apologies!"

She bowed, shrinking back in such fear that it made Arata look on with pity. As he observed her, he felt both faintly sympathetic and oddly satisfied that he would be protecting this woman going forward.

Given her frailty, she definitely needed protection.

Though she really did seem to have a dour and miserable personality after all.

"It's okay, please raise your head."

In any event, everything was already set in motion.

He would suck her in, snatch her away, and then finally find value in himself.

Arata plastered a smile free of malevolence on his mouth and stared her squarely in the eyes.

The spacious parlor was completely quiet.

The interior of the ornately decorated room had almost no furnishings, save for a futon laid out in the middle of the floor. There, lying under its covers, was an elderly man.

“Hideous. Truly an eyesore.”

The man muttered venomously, glaring with his gaunt, deep-set eyes. Yet his body had withered away like a dying tree, so the only sound that feebly escaped his lips amounted to little more than a sigh.

He was revered as the most exalted man in the empire, and until recently, he would always be accompanied by a swarm of people. For him to now be so lonesome was nothing short of cruel irony.

“Your Majesty, may I come in?”

Suddenly, a voice called to him from outside the room. After a brusque “yes,” the sliding door opened, and a refined young man quietly entered.

The elderly man again whipped his eyes around and glared at his visitor.

Clad in a well-fitted three-piece suit, the chestnut-haired man was a bit difficult to deal with but a necessary pawn for the old man’s current plans.

“What is it?”

“I humbly request you bestow your approval regarding the incident in question.”

The man now remembered. He had put this pawn on standby for the time being.

He unearthed the memories, which were often liable to elude him as of late, until he finally found the reason why the young man had come to him.

“I see.”

He plainly replied to the visitor kowtowing at his bedside.

Preparations would soon be complete. Just a little longer, a little longer until he could eradicate all of his worries and concerns.

“Please, Your Majesty, I ask for your approval. I simply cannot wait any longer. Things need to be where they belong. Please grant us the opportunity to fulfill our fervent wish.”

“Watch your words. You say too much.”

“…My apologies.”

It was a feeble rebuke, but it was more than enough to quiet his impertinent young guest.

Though his body had withered, the authority the man was born with still remained hale and hearty.

“Things will start to move soon. I shall authorize your actions, as well.”

As he spoke, the man gnashed his teeth in humiliation and frustration.

Why did he need to concern himself with whelps and girls? Normally, he was loath to have such inconsequential people force him into this emotional turmoil.

Detestable. Atrocious. Odious.

Nevertheless, if he gave up here, everything would be for naught.

This was all so that his blood would be carried on for generations to come. To ensure no one could threaten him. To leave the institutions he had kept strong behind. Threats would be eliminated.

“Do not misread your opportunity.”

“…Understood. Then I will begin our operation as scheduled.”

The young man bowed and exited the room with quiet footsteps.

Silence fell once again on the tatami-floored chamber.

The man thought of the future. Even when he closed his eyes, he couldn’t see it anymore.

Of course, not once had the gods showed him the future of his descendants. That was precisely why he needed to make his own moves—so he could take hold of the future he envisioned.

The man rang the bell left at his bedside, and a chamberlain poked his head into the room.

“You called for me, Your Majesty?”

“…Drive the ghosts in the Burial Grounds to the countryside. Regardless of how many live or die.”

“Understood.”

The chamberlain solemnly accepted the man’s orders, nary a hint of an emotion showing on his face.

“I’ll crush that Gift, no matter what…”

There would be no need for it in the country his son was to reign over.

Slowly lowering his eyelids, the man fell into a deep, deep sleep.

⚜ *CHAPTER 1* ⚜

Nightmares and Disquieting Shadows

During the summer, things heated up as soon as morning passed.

Once-refreshing air warmed, and temperatures soared, bringing sweltering, sweat-soaked weather in the blink of an eye.

Finishing the laundry, Miyo Saimori sighed in the shade, exhausted.

Looks like today will be another scorcher.

On the outskirts of the city stood a small house, in which Miyo lived inauspiciously with her fiancé, Kiyoka Kudou.

Quiet and unsophisticated, the house was surrounded by natural serenity. Though the blazing sunlight wasn't as harsh here as it was in the city, by midsummer, it was still enough to be exhausting.

Amid the heat, Miyo heard the whooshing of something cutting hard through the air from the front garden.

When she went behind the house to check the source of the noise, she found Kiyoka taking practice swings with a wooden sword.

His smooth hair undulated as he brandished the weapon. His bluish eyes were narrowed with intensity, and his movements were so graceful that they would strike even an amateur as beautiful. The master of the house had features that were practically flawless—feminine grace mixed with masculine gallantry.

He never neglected his practice, even on days like these, when he was off duty.

Oh no, I can't be spacing out like this. He should be wrapping up soon.

Flushed from either the heat or her own shame, Miyo covered her cheeks with both hands and returned inside for the time being.

When she entered the garden again, carrying a carefully folded hand towel and cold water, Kiyoka had just stopped to take a break.

“Here you are, Kiyoka.”

“Oh, thank you.”

Her cheeks warmed at his gentle smile.

Kiyoka was overwhelmingly gorgeous. That was why her chest pounded every time he smiled at her. Nothing could be worse for her heart.

“Miyo, your face is red. Are you all right?”

“Ah!”

Miyo instinctively shrank backward a half step when he peered at her.

But Kiyoka, without any regard for her reaction, brought his hand up to her forehead.

“Doesn’t seem to be a fever.”

“Yes, I-I’m fine. Perfectly fine.”

“Really?”

He removed his hand, and the tension she’d been holding in her body drained in relief. Her pulse, however, still throbbed in her ears.

“I’m going to wash off. Be sure to rest if you’re not feeling well.”

“I—I will.”

Watching as Kiyoka disappeared inside the house, Miyo heaved a sigh.

Things had played out like this over and over again lately. Even just a few days ago—

I—I can think about this later!

Nearly flushing again at the memory, Miyo returned to pick up the laundry utensils in a tizzy.

A few minutes later, a guest showed up at their door.

“Pardon me.”

Standing in the entryway was a woman dressed in an outfit slightly incongruous with the austere home.

“Nice to meet you. You must be Miyo. I’m Hazuki Kudou, Kiyoka’s older sister.”

The woman—Hazuki—had run up to Miyo with sparkling eyes the moment she laid eyes on her future sister-in-law. It caught Miyo off guard.

“N-nice to meet you…”

Still overwhelmed by Hazuki’s presence, Miyo somehow managed to return her greeting.

The woman claiming to be Kiyoka’s sister was beautiful, and she gave off a bright, cheerful impression.

Though her features resembled Kiyoka’s in places, her overall demeanor was gentle and feminine. She was on the taller side for a woman, with loose brown hair billowing down to her shoulders. Porcelain legs that seemed like they had never seen the sun extended out from beneath her breezy dress. She might have been one of those “modern girls.”

Though she appeared lightly dressed, the quality of the Western clothes and accessories she wore clearly showed her high social standing.

“It is good to see you again, Miss Hazuki.”

Their maid, Yurie, came into the entryway to greet their guest, beaming as she bowed. Hazuki then took the maid’s hand into her own and shook it vigorously.

“Yurie! It has truly been a while. Why, how many years has it been now? I’m so glad to see you’re still doing well.”

“Thank you, miss.”

Standing there flabbergasted, Miyo worried that such an intense handshake would tear poor Yurie’s arm off.

But when she saw the maid’s bright, smiling face, the concern seemed unnecessary.

“Honestly…you never change, do you, Sis?”

Already finished washing up, Kiyoka appeared to greet his sister with a sullen glance.

“Oh, Kiyoka. What, not hard at work?”

“Off duty.”

“Honestly. You’re as surly as ever. Even after you’ve gotten yourself such an adorable fiancée, too.”

“Mind your own business.”

Despite being older than her brother, Hazuki came off as youthful as she pouted at him; the girlishness of her mannerisms was strangely fitting.

“Fine, fine. More importantly, Miyo dear. Oh, are you fine with just ‘Miyo’?”

“Y-yes.”

“Kiyoka asked me to serve as your teacher. Were you aware of this?”

“Umm…”

She knew they were having a guest, of course. Miyo herself had asked Kiyoka for a teacher in the first place, but she hadn’t heard anything about her tutor being Kiyoka’s very own sister.

Still flustered, she recalled the events that had minutes prior crossed her mind briefly.

The quarrel among the Saimoris, Tatsuishis, and Kudous was settled for the time being, and tranquility had returned. As before, Miyo spent her days handling the housework.

She had always yearned for an uneventful and tranquil daily life, so she had absolutely nothing to complain about. She was so happy, it terrified her.

But somewhere in a corner of her mind, a vague anxiety seeped in that the current situation wasn’t acceptable.

Her position as Kiyoka’s wife meant her primary duty was taking care of their home and supporting her husband. She knew that alone wouldn’t be enough.

Perfect etiquette, familiarity with tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and the koto. The knowledge, conversational skills, and dance forms required for social gatherings.

Normally considered fundamental to the education of any young lady of noble blood, these skills were indispensable when mingling with other families. And Miyo was no exception since she was set to wed the head of the exalted Kudou family.

Thus, after slowly picking at her food through dinner one night, she’d put down her chopsticks and made up her mind to broach the subject.

“You want to redo your education?”

“Yes. Is…that a problem?”

When she thought back, Miyo realized she *had been* educated as the aristocratic daughter of the Saimori family for a time. But her stepmother had discontinued her schooling early in life, leaving her knowing only the basics. Without any opportunity to make use of what little she had learned, her skills eventually drifted from her memory entirely.

Kiyoka never mentioned this fact. But as his bride-to-be, she knew it was unacceptable. She couldn’t let him coddle her forever.

“It’s not necessarily an issue, but…you’re set on this, then?”

Kiyoka was lost in thought, a frown on his face.

She thought he was probably being considerate of the burden it would put on her. Neither social graces nor hospitality were her forte, and she was awkward and clumsy. While she wasn’t making this request lightly, there was a chance it could be a bigger responsibility than she had imagined and affect their daily lives.

But Miyo couldn’t back down now.

“Yes, I am. I’ll find my own tutor, and I won’t cause any problems for you, Kiyoka… Please.”

“……”

Miyo lowered her head deeply, then felt a sigh come from above.

“Always bowing with you, isn’t it? Also.”

Suspicious that he had suddenly fallen silent, Miyo raised her head to find him staring straight at her.

His slightly stiff, fair-skinned fingertip was stretched out to her cheek.

“You’re looking a little pale. Aren’t you pushing yourself hard enough already?”

“……!”

Her face grew hot with embarrassment. Flustered, she shook her head.

“I-I’m not overextending myself! I’m perfectly healthy.”

“Well, with your face red enough to suggest a fever, I’m not inclined to agree.”

“What?! Um, this is, um, it’s just that…”

Kiyoka chuckled as Miyo hurriedly tried to explain herself.

She wasn’t used to being poked fun at. Though she had nothing but fond feelings for him, his teasing did annoy her slightly.

“K-Kiyoka…”

“Don’t stare at me so reproachfully. Forgive me… I suppose it’s fine, then. I know someone who could make a good teacher. I’ll get in touch and make her come here.”

“What?”

Miyo was startled by how offhandedly her fiancé had said he would “make them come here.”

“No need for reservations. It’ll just be employing someone without anything better to do.”

“With nothing better to do…?”

At the time, he’d dropped the topic then and there before she could say anything else. Miyo wondered what he had meant, but…

…I never would have guessed it would be…

Kiyoka's older sister.

Miyo was practically buckling under the nervousness and anxiety she felt toward the beaming woman before her.

"I'm sure Kiyoka didn't explain anything to you, did he?"

"N-no…"

"Don't worry. I'll take responsibility for turning you into a magnificent noblewoman, okay?"

She declared with a smile, clenching her hand into a fist.

With the conversation settled, they quickly brought Hazuki into the living room to serve her tea.

The servant accompanying Kiyoka's sister went in and out of the house unloading the luggage she had brought with her. Yurie, too, removed herself from the room at some point, leaving Miyo, Kiyoka, and Hazuki alone together.

"Okay, I'd like to get to the topic at hand then. Miyo, you want to study, right?"

"Yes."

Miyo nodded at Hazuki's question.

"Well, not only did I manage to graduate from girls' school, but as you can guess, I've taken *plenty* of lessons ever since I was young, so I'll definitely be able to teach you the basics… Are you fine with that?"

Hazuki frowned with slight apprehension.

Fine with that…?

As long as Hazuki could teach her, Miyo had absolutely nothing to complain about at all.

When she briefly cast her eyes slightly farther off toward Kiyoka, he silently returned her gaze. At the moment, he didn't seem keen on saying a peep.

Miyo turned directly to Hazuki.

"I don't have any problems at all. Um…why do you ask?"

"Well, I've already had one marriage end in failure. And dealing with your sister-in-law's got to be annoying, right?"

Though her realization had been delayed, now Miyo understood.

Kiyoka's sister had introduced herself as Hazuki *Kudou*. At her age, daughters from well-to-do families shouldn't have been single. That meant she'd been married off once and had returned to her family. Miyo could tell Hazuki's comment about sisters-in-law had come from her own experiences.

Miyo was dismayed that she'd accidentally posed an insensitive question.

"That sort of thing…doesn't bother me at all."

"Really? You're sure?"

"Yes."

"Great!"

Hazuki broke into a big smile, enthusiastically wrapping her arms around the other woman. A slightly sweet fragrance tickled her nose.

The sudden embrace caught Miyo completely by surprise.

"Eh?! U-um…"

"What a wonderful girl! Kiyoka, can I take her home with me?"

"Absolutely not."

He indignantly crossed his arms.

“You’re no fun. Bringing her back with me would let her really focus on her studies, though.”

“…No.”

“That’s fair, I suppose. After all, if I took Miyo away, you’d get awfully lonely, wouldn’t you?”

It seemed the younger brother couldn’t keep up with his older sister’s teasing.

Despite how he furrowed his brow in annoyance, he clearly wasn’t altogether angry. Seeing this rare side of him warmed Miyo’s heart.

But I wonder why, then…

She involuntarily raised her hand up to her breast.

Deep in her chest, she felt a cold wind blowing. Kiyoka was kind, as always. So was Hazuki, even though this was the first time the two women had met. And yet Miyo was feeling lonely. Why?

“Is something wrong, Miyo?”

She realized that Kiyoka was staring straight at her. Hazuki had also cocked her head in confusion, which sent Miyo panicking.

“N-nothing’s wrong at all.”

“Really? If you’re feeling unwell—”

“It’s okay. I’m fine.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard now, okay?”

Kiyoka had been fretting an awful lot over Miyo’s health lately. Though there were a number of possible explanations, perhaps he already knew.

But all that meant was that she couldn’t afford to stop here. She wanted to shed her few inconvenient qualities and move forward.

After she'd insisted that she was fine, Kiyoka didn't press any further. With Hazuki also smiling in relief, they returned to the topic of Miyo's studies.

"Well then, I think it's important to have a bit of a goal in mind, wouldn't you say?"

"A goal?"

Hazuki took out a number of textbooks from her luggage and arranged them in front of her.

"That's right. With a bit of a goal in mind, it'll be easier to apply yourself, right? Things won't go quite as smoothly if you aim for some sort of lofty ideal."

It made sense to Miyo when it was laid out this way. Striving to achieve a goal that you could attain with some elbow grease would actually allow her to measure her progress.

"There's going to be a very nice party happening two months from now. Both Kiyoka and I are invited, so we can start by having you attend with us."

"What?"

The sudden turn startled Miyo.

She had never been to any sort of social gathering before. Her basic etiquette was already dubious, so she couldn't believe she would be ready to attend a gathering in a mere two months' time.

Hazuki smiled as though she saw through the concerns weighing on Miyo.

"No need to worry. I've known the organizer for a long time, and they're someone we're both comfortable with. And to be honest, the party is just a simple get-together."

"But…"

Kiyoka interjected as Miyo struggled to digest the situation.

“Can’t hurt to give it a try, right?”

“B-but…Kiyoka…”

“There’s no point in studying if you can’t put it into practice, right?”

It was a harsh way to phrase it, but he was absolutely right. If she couldn’t muster up her courage now, all her efforts would be pointless.

She wanted to change. That meant she had to do this.

“I understand… Please allow me to attend the party as well.”

Miyo was aware of the stiff expression on her face. Just saying that she would join the gathering made her terribly nervous. It felt as if her heart were bouncing around inside her chest as it pounded.

“You’ll be fine. I’m not going to tell you to slip into a dress and start dancing out of nowhere, okay? We’ll both do our best until then, got it?”

“All right.”

Hazuki was kind. While her loquaciousness was wholly unlike Kiyoka, the generosity she showed was similar to his own.

She was truly grateful to her fiancé for calling his sister to serve as her instructor.

After broadly outlining their arrangement going forward, Hazuki left behind a mountain of textbooks for Miyo, then went home to the main Kudou residence.

Though the books were all slightly faded from sunlight, probably since Hazuki had used them in girls’ school herself, they were so

pristine otherwise that it seemed hard to believe they'd belonged to someone else. Miyo gleefully gazed at them all.

Seeing a rare sparkle in her eyes, Kiyoka watched on with mixed feelings.

…I know that things can't keep going like this.

Wasn't it about time he made her quit studying?

Despite his concern, when he saw the happy look on Miyo's face, he couldn't say a word.

That night, he awoke to a strange sensation.

A feeling Kiyoka was very familiar with was oozing, wafting through the house amid the dark, like ink being washed away in a fresh pool of water.

Not again, he thought, but it was difficult for him to ignore.

Slowly rising from his futon and taking care not to move too loudly, he stood outside the room provided to his betrothed.

Now that he thought about it, there had been signs from the start. Ever since she'd come to his house. But in the beginning, they'd been too faint for even Kiyoka to detect, so he hadn't noticed them.

The presence of supernatural abilities.

Like the smell of gunpowder after firing a pistol, the sensation that remained after using supernatural abilities was all around him.

Her faintly anguished voice, all too familiar as well, leaked through the screen door.

……Miyo.

Kiyoka slowly slid the screen open and entered.

The presence of supernatural abilities grew markedly thicker. A tingling jolt ran across his skin, and his breath caught in his throat as though he were choking.

Slowly approaching the futon laid out in the center of the room, he sat down beside her.

“N-no… Stop, please…”

No matter how many times he saw Miyo like this, weakly mumbling in delirium, sweat dripping down her forehead, it made Kiyoka’s heart ache.

“It’s all right… You’re okay now.”

He wrapped one hand tightly around hers, icy cold despite the hot summer night, and with the other, he brushed her bangs from her forehead.

Kiyoka stayed at her side until he at last heard her breathing grow steady and peaceful.

At dawn, Miyo blearily opened her eyes on top of her futon.

Her face was hardened and stiff, with traces of sweat and tears still lingering on her cheeks.

…She’d had another nightmare.

It had been several months since she’d moved here from the Saimori estate. The season had passed from spring to summer. Yet that whole time, Miyo had been hounded by bad dreams night after night.

While there were times when she would recall everything that had happened in her dreams, there were others when she would forget everything immediately.

At first, it had seemed as if the majority of her visions had concerned bitter and painful memories from her time in the Saimori house, but now there were others. In some dreams, a group of people she didn't know would disparage her, while in others, she would be locked up in a tight, dark space. There were nightmares where monsters chased her down, or visions of people dying, as well as—

"Dreams. They're just dreams…"

Sometimes, Kiyoka and Yurie would appear to her as well. On those nights, her heart ached even more.

Miyo was accustomed to waking up in tears, but she was also so terrified of her nightmares that she hesitated to go to sleep. Consequently, she fell quickly behind on getting enough rest, to the point where her physical condition was beginning to suffer for it.

Her body, which her fiancé's care and concern had temporarily brought back to health, was once again on the decline.

…I can't cause trouble for Kiyoka.

There was still so much more she needed to do. She didn't have the time to rest or lie in bed.

Miyo rubbed her face with her hands briefly before getting dressed as usual and rushing over to the kitchen.

"I'll see you later."

"Have a good day."

After seeing Kiyoka off at the door, Miyo let out a deep sigh.

For the second day in a row, the temperature had gradually risen as the morning went on. Coupled with the extra humidity, the heat

turned the air sticky and damp. In this environment, she couldn't help but feel her stamina rapidly deplete.

It was a casual gesture, but Yurie frowned slightly when she looked up at her.

"Miss Miyo, please don't push yourself. The summer heat saps the body's energy…"

"I-I'm okay," Miyo quickly asserted, before heading back inside.

Both Kiyoka and Yurie carefully watched over her, and both were very perceptive. She understood more than anyone else just how wonderful it was to have someone fretting over her, but she couldn't let them pamper her forever.

Though it may not have been enough, she did get *some* sleep each night, so she didn't believe the weather would have much effect on her. She was just a little lethargic; that was all.

If I can bear with it, I'm sure everything will go back to normal eventually.

Internally persuading herself, she returned to the kitchen and quickly finished washing the dishes.

She wouldn't have any problem calming down while she handled household chores she had performed for many years now. The tasks were so ingrained in her that her body would practically move on its own.

When she'd finished cleaning up the kitchen, she moved on to the laundry.

The cold water of the fountain felt pleasant in the summer morning. As she scrubbed the laundry, liquid splashing out of the washbasin, it felt as if she were rinsing out her own hazy and absentminded head.

Once the moisture was cleanly wrung out, Miyo hung the thoroughly washed laundry up to dry on the clothes pole. Though it was an everyday chore, she always felt a slight sense of achievement once everything had dried.

"…Phew."

She was fine. She could keep going.

Compared to how things had been at her previous residence, this amount of exertion wouldn't have even registered with her.

Smacking her cheeks with both hands, Miyo fired herself up once more.

Hazuki would be coming by again later to tutor her. Before she arrived, Miyo wanted to review some of the book she'd been loaned the day before.

"Um, Yurie. I'm going to prepare for my lessons in my room for a bit, if you don't mind."

"Yes, yes, of course. You can leave the cleaning to me."

Holding the tub in her arms as she returned into the house, Miyo called out to the maid, and Yurie cheerfully nodded her head.

Though she felt guilty for burdening Yurie, she picked up one of the textbooks in her room.

An Encouragement of the Home.

An extremely direct title.

The content seemed to focus on the basics of household chores. It began with a long, drawn-out treatise across multiple pages on the meaning of the phrase *good wife, wise mother*, as well as one's duty as a spouse and parent, and how to maintain the home with one's husband.

Even the most obvious points were painstakingly and scrupulously laid out, as if to ingrain the words into the reader's brain.

Oh no…

The more she read, the more her anxieties surged.

Miyo wanted to become a spouse worthy of Kiyoka. Did that mean becoming a *good wife, wise mother*? Or did it mean becoming an outstanding lady who was always preparing food, clothing, and other necessities for her husband?

If that was the case, then what was different from how things already were?

The aristocratic wife Miyo had the most familiarity with was her stepmother, Kanoko. Thinking that she needed to do as much as Kanoko did, she'd decided to ask for someone to tutor her.

I don't think I'm making a mistake, but…

The ideal wife, a spouse worthy of Kiyoka. These ambiguous ideas clung to Miyo's mind like fuzzy, formless shadows. Now all she had left was anxiety about whether this was the correct path to tread, the path she'd chosen for herself.

Miyo stopped turning the pages. Time marched on as she sat in dazed uncertainty.

After a short while, Hazuki arrived as scheduled, and their lesson kicked off immediately.

"Now then, Miyo. What should we start with first?"

Grinning, Hazuki was as stunning as the day before.

Despite the woman's cheerful and talkative demeanor, when Miyo looked carefully, she realized Hazuki's gestures and behavior were just as exquisite. Miyo couldn't fathom how she would look after

getting the hang of mimicking these mannerisms in time for the party.

Hazuki raised her brow as Miyo sank lower and lower.

“There’s no need to look so anxious. From what I’ve seen so far, I personally think your poise and bearing are more than graceful enough.”

“You think so…?”

“I do. You had etiquette lessons when you were young, didn’t you? I wonder if those fundamental mannerisms have already become a habit for you.”

Although they treated her like a servant, Miyo had indeed put care into her behavior and mannerisms to avoid sullying the Saimori family name. The things she’d learned were paying off…

When she considered that something she’d gleaned during those days of hardship and cruelty was now beneficial to her, she felt ready to burst into tears.

“Let’s save flower arrangement and tea ceremony for later since we’re preparing for a party. Kiyoka also said you don’t need any lessons on housework, either… We’ll prioritize manners and conversation skills, then. Give me just a moment to find something, okay?”

Hazuki started rummaging through the pile of textbooks from the day before.

Her movements seemed almost childlike, totally opposite of the comfortable and leisurely mannerism moments prior, which helped Miyo choke back her tears.

“U-um…M-Miss Hazuki…”

The instant Miyo addressed her, Hazuki’s hand went still, and she turned around wide-eyed in shock.

“What was that?”

“Huh?”

Had she said anything strange?

Hazuki gently placed her hand to her mouth and clarified her comment to the bewildered Miyo.

“My name. What did you just call me?”

“Oh, um…I called you, Miss Hazuki…”

“No, no, no!”

Miyo’s shoulders trembled in shock at her biting rebuke.

“Oh, I’m sorry… I shouldn’t have yelled out of nowhere like that.”

“I-it’s fine.”

“Sheesh, there I go, doing it again…,” Hazuki said, sighing.

The sudden rebuke shook Miyo, reminding her of her time before meeting Kiyoka.

Judging from Hazuki’s reaction, it seemed Kiyoka had told her about the treatment Miyo endured in her previous home.

If anything, though, Miyo felt sorry for making Hazuki take extra care around her.

The other woman gave another brief apology before trying to lighten the mood, taking Miyo’s hands into hers with a smile.

“The thing is, Miyo. If it’s all right, I’d like you to treat me like your big sister.”

“…E-excuse me?”

The abruptness of the request caught Miyo totally off guard.

“You see, I’ve always wanted a cute younger sister like you. But instead, I was stuck with a little brother, and he just isn’t cute at all! It’s a tragedy, really.”

“Um…”

“Miyo. You’re cute, you’re very well mannered, why, you’re perfect. Kiyoka’s never been any fun. I always considered him a stubborn little brat, but I’ll give him credit for picking a wonderful girl like you to be his bride.”

“…I see.”

Miyo couldn’t get a word in edgewise as Hazuki rhapsodized, her eyes slowly beginning to sparkle.

“I want to get to know you better. After all, we’re going to be family, right? Let me pamper you; lean on me as much as you want! Kiyoka’s surly and taciturn, so it’s hard to tell what’s going on in that head of his, but I’m sure he feels the same.”

“…Family.”

“That’s right, family. So there’s no need for any formalities, okay? I’d be overjoyed if you’d call me ‘sister’ instead. Of course, you don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“S-sis…?”

Sister.

Miyo was certain she’d flash the same innocent, childlike smile in delight if she did call her that… But.

“My dear sister.”

She froze up every time someone called her that. It terrified her.

That girl was gone now. But Miyo still couldn't help remembering. Couldn't help but recall her family and her sole little sister.

As an image of her sister flickered before her eyes, Miyo hesitated to call Hazuki by the title she'd requested.

"…Is it okay, um, if I call you Hazuki instead?"

At this, the other woman smiled and replied, "Of course."

Miyo was happy that Hazuki had the consideration to completely hide her disappointment.

The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station. A section of the capital.

Kiyoka, as commander of the unit, was once again focusing solely on dealing with the paperwork in his office.

"Commaaander."

"What?"

Kiyoka kept his eyes on his desk as he answered the voice of his trusted subordinate, Godou, who was peeking his head into the office.

"The major general's here to see you."

"…He's early."

He frowned upon learning of the visitor, who'd arrived ahead of schedule. His guest was his direct superior, though, and an extremely busy man. It wasn't Kiyoka's place to complain.

He hastened to the reception room.

"My apologies for the delay, Major General Ookaito, sir."

"It's fine. I got here too early. Sorry for interrupting your work, Kiyoka."

“Not at all.”

Sitting on the reception room sofa, the giant man dressed in a military uniform gave a forced smile. He left a somewhat boorish impression.

Masashi Ookaito. He was an officer with the General Staff of the Imperial Army who held the rank of major general. At forty years old, he was on the younger side among the primary players in the capital, but as the heir of the Ookaito family, who were known for producing many military men, he was expected to do great things in the future.

Additionally, he also exercised formal command over the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, which the rest of the military regarded with disdain.

“There’s something I wanted to talk to you about before we head to the Imperial Palace.”

“What is it, sir?”

Kiyoka sat down opposite him and inquired. A mixture of emotions passed over Ookaito’s face before he answered bluntly.

“There’s been a grave robbery.”

“…Really, sir?”

“That’s right.”

Kiyoka couldn’t help reacting with anything other than a frown.

“I believe that’s a job for the police.”

Disposing of beings commonly referred to as ghosts largely fell under the jurisdiction of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.

Surprisingly, however, graveyards were not home to malevolent spirits who required extermination. The fact there were graves in the first place meant that the deceased interred there had been given

proper memorial services. A few getting dug up wouldn't cause any major issues.

There were, of course, outlier cases where problems had resulted from grave robberies, so Kiyoka knew he still needed to ask his superior for a more detailed account.

"I'm well aware. It's not that anything's happened, per se, but…"

Ookaito's strangely ambiguous answer showed he was indeed at a bit of a loss.

"It seems they somehow managed to break into the Forbidden Land outside the city, see," the major general added.

"…Excuse me?"

Unable to believe his ears, Kiyoka stood there bewildered for a few moments.

As its name suggested, the Forbidden Land was a region outside the city, far from human settlements, where access was strictly controlled. At first glance, it looked like nothing more than a forest, but it was actually under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Imperial Household—that is to say, the domain of generations of emperors and their families—and like with all their secrets, its true purpose could not be disclosed to the public.

If Ookaito was referring to this area, then by *grave*, he must have meant…

"No, you're kidding."

"I'm dead serious. The Burial Grounds were desecrated."

"Hng!"

He gasped.

There was only one graveyard located in the Forbidden Land. It was known as the Burial Grounds.

Simply put, it was a cemetery for Gift-users.

People with the Gift or Spirit-Sight generally possessed a large amount of spiritual power. Thus, when they passed, their souls ultimately grew even stronger, which meant a regular memorial service often wasn't enough to put them to rest.

The Burial Grounds was where the spirits of those Gift-users were sealed away.

But if it had been desecrated, then…

Many Gift-users perish in battle, resentful and holding hatred and anguish in their hearts. If their ghosts are awakened from their slumber and set free, then there's plenty of reason to be concerned they might direct their hatred on the general populace.

Kiyoka brought his hand to his chin as his thoughts raced through his head.

Specters possessed no reason or intellect. If the released spirits made it out of the Forbidden Land, there was no telling what sort of damage they'd wreak.

I imagine that the Ministry of the Imperial Household is doing what they can…

It wouldn't be easy to return the escaped ghosts back to the Forbidden Land and seal them away once again. The issue would take time to resolve, regardless of how they went about it.

"What's the situation? How many of the seals were lifted?"

"Apparently, the Ministry of the Imperial Household's practitioners have mostly gotten it under control. That said, they aren't giving us much information. Even when we inquired about it directly, they were coy. Puts us in a rough spot, honestly."

Ookaito sighed, his expression grim. The news made Kiyoka want to sigh right along with him.

“At any rate, if the Ministry of the Imperial Household’s avoiding the topic, it must mean they haven’t been able to keep all the seals there in check. We can’t let anything happen to the citizenry, so we’ll stay on guard as well.”

“I appreciate it.”

Kiyoka wasn’t a fan of how the Ministry of the Imperial Household was handling things, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it. All he and his men could do was pray that a request for their cooperation would come before any harm befell the general public.

With the headache-inducing subject out of the way, Ookaito stood up from the sofa.

“All right, you good to go? I figured we’d head over to the Imperial Palace now.”

“Yes, that won’t be a problem.”

Departing the station as previously scheduled, Kiyoka climbed inside the major general’s automobile, where one of Ookaito’s subordinates was at the wheel. From here, the two men headed toward the Imperial Palace, residence of the emperor.

There was no shortage of things to discuss inside the car along the way.

While their conversations almost always went to their work, the two men had dealings in both their private and their public lives, and they enjoyed a close, trusting relationship. Since they were so busy that they rarely had a chance to spend a moment of downtime together, there were plenty of things to catch up on.

“Kiyoka, I heard you’re betrothed. How have things been?”

“Nothing worth mentioning, really,” he evasively replied to the inevitable question. Ookaito continued on, unfazed by the commander’s expressionless face and curt tone.

“Considering how opposed to settling down you’ve been, you must really get along with her, huh.”

“…I wasn’t purposefully avoiding marriage, you know.”

As the head of the Kudou family, he would be forced to wed eventually, and he’d never taken issue with that fact. He’d simply never found a suitable partner.

In that sense, he could say that he got along well with Miyo indeed.

“Still, must’ve been a tough time, given everything that happened. You must be pretty serious about her since you stuck by her after all that.”

“She wasn’t at all to blame for any of it.”

“…Looks like the talk about you hating women was completely wrong, too.”

“You’re free to think whatever you want.”

Ookaito discreetly kept his chuckle in his throat following the curt reply.

Evidently, all the details regarding the uproar resulting in the Saimoris’ house being burned to the ground had reached the major general as well.

Suddenly feeling that it was a bit hard to breathe, Kiyoka cleared his throat, then took the opportunity to artlessly change the subject.

“Do you think Tatsuishi’s there already?”

“Yeah. He’s unexpectedly diligent with his work, it sounds like.”

“Not surprising, really. That family can’t afford to lose any more of their reputation.”

Kiyoka’s true feelings on the matter were that it’d only be more trouble for him if Tatsuishi wasn’t.

Owing to the crimes of the former head of their family, Minoru Tatsuishi, the role of head of the family had passed down to his eldest son, Kazushi Tatsuishi.

This Kazushi was a bit of an odd fellow, though. Neither Kiyoka nor Ookaito really expected him to maintain his family's position now that their reputation had fallen so low, yet he was apparently smoothly fulfilling his role as the family successor. He handled complicated procedures without difficulty and willingly complied with military and police investigations.

Half of their business at the Imperial Palace involved him, and they planned on meeting up when they arrived.

Before too long, their automobile passed through the castle gate belonging to the highest-born family in the whole country.

A moat stretched around the vast grounds, and alongside the stone pathway rose lines of verdant trees, from cherry blossoms to pines. A number of residences were scattered across the grounds, each housing a member of the imperial family, but Kiyoka's group was visiting the biggest among them, which was located in the exact center of the premises.

Exiting the automobile after it had parked in front of the entryway, the two men walked the familiar path inside the residence.

"Your other companion is waiting this way, please."

Their servant guide opened the sliding door, and beyond it they saw Kazushi Tatsuishi, who'd gotten there ahead of them.

"Hello, Mr. Kudou, Mr. Ookaito."

The young libertine man, wrapped in an ostentatious kimono, looked at them and flashed a dubious smile.

"…Tatsuishi, you plan on going in front of His Excellency like that?"

Kiyoka pressed down on his temples, feeling the beginning of a headache.

Unfortunately, since the Tatsuishis were now a retainer clan to the Kudous, Kiyoka was responsible for supervising them. He couldn't let Kazushi off without a stern scolding.

"I'm not with the military, and I heard that Gift-users were all like this anyway."

Kazushi replied nonchalantly, showing no deference whatsoever.

Kiyoka conceded that what he'd said was indeed true. The only rule that Gift-users needed to follow was serving the emperor. For Gift-users outside the military, that meant they weren't subject to any particular clothing requirements. There was no inherent problem with Kazushi's outfit.

This custom dated back from before the Restoration, from times immemorial. It also served as proof of just how special the Gift-users were to the country.

Nevertheless, Kiyoka still wanted him to follow the bare minimum of proper etiquette. The garish yellow and red colors of Kazushi's clothes were hard on the eyes.

"This is my formal wear, so to speak, Mr. Kudou. No need to be so uptight about it."

"…Just this once. Do it again, and your head will be on the floor."

Seeing the look of commiseration in Ookaito's eyes made Kiyoka wish he was done already.

Despite their momentary quarrel, they joined up with Kazushi, and then the time came for them to finally meet with the person they were there to see.

Though the atmosphere was grand and imposing, Kiyoka and Ookaito had grown accustomed to it at this point.

They reached the innermost area of the residence. On the other side of the extravagantly designed sliding door was the chamber the nobles living there used to hold audiences with guests.

“Excuse me. Ookaito, Kudou, and Tatsuishi have arrived.”

“You may enter.”

Ookaito announced their presence on behalf of the group, and a reply promptly came from beyond the sliding door.

“It has been too long, Prince Takaihito.”

They entered the room to find that the resident noble was seated directly before them, in front of a recessed alcove.

Bright red lips on snow-white skin. Any emotion remained completely obscured beneath his almond-shaped eyes. Despite being close to Kiyoka in age, the man’s figure was so otherworldly that some might take him for a boy or even a girl. At the same time, he possessed an intimidating aura that naturally made others put up their guard.

He had no last name. He went by only one name: Takaihito.

This meant he was indeed a child of the emperor. In other words, he was an imperial prince, the very next in line to succeed the imperial throne.

“Thank you for coming, Masashi, Kiyoka. And the new head of the Tatsuishis.”

The three guests lined up and prostrated themselves before the prince. Even Kazushi knew enough to be well behaved here.

Takaihito sat leaning on an armrest, with what appeared to be a smile on his lips.

“Please, raise your heads and be at ease.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Following after Ookaito's reply, Kiyoka and Kazushi both raised their heads and straightened out their posture. While no one here was foolish enough to fully relax, Takaihito's words did serve to slightly loosen the tense atmosphere.

Kiyoka exchanged a quick glance with Ookaito, and the two swapped positions with each other.

The topic at hand involved supernatural abilities and thus fell under Kiyoka's purview. While Ookaito was Kiyoka's superior, being Giftless himself, he'd accompanied his subordinate simply as a formality.

Kiyoka bent his head down slightly and began to speak.

"…Prince Takaihito, I would like to give Kazushi the opportunity to introduce himself."

"Very well. Let us hear it."

At Kiyoka's prompt, the young man moved forward slightly and bowed his head.

"My name is Kazushi Tatsuishi, Your Majesty. I have begun serving as the new head of the Tatsuishi family. Allow me to offer up my deepest words of gratitude for granting me an audience, despite our family's recent crimes, committed in defiance of the Gifts heaven sent to us."

"Pay it no mind. You had quite a difficult time as well, did you not?"

"Thank you, Your Majesty, I am unworthy of such kindness. The Tatsuishi family is now under the Kudou family's beck and call, and I intend to do my utmost to restore honor and confidence in my clan's sullied name."

"I pardon your line in the emperor's stead. Ensure you do not fail to live up to your words."

"Absolutely, Your Majesty," Kazushi replied before again prostrating himself before Takaihito.

Gift-users submitted to the emperor alone. Thus, even if they were tried and made to atone in accordance with the laws of society, they would be unable to justify their existence without an official pardon from the Crown.

Now the Tatsuishis had received permission to serve the emperor once again.

“You had a rough time of things, too, Kiyoka. It is a shame what befell the Saimori family.”

Though the Saimoris’ position had been on the decline, they had still lost a family that inherited the Gift. It was a huge blow to both the emperor and Japan itself. Enough to normally prompt an investigation into who was ultimately responsible.

Since there were no deaths from the latest incident, and the bad actors of the Saimori family had all been properly punished, things had been left undecided. That was all.

Kiyoka despondently cast his eyes down.

“Forgive me for failing to stop it.”

“It does not matter. Theirs was a predetermined fate.”

Takaihito smiled, nodding magnanimously. Kiyoka relaxed his shoulders and let out a sigh of relief.

Since the imperial prince and the empire’s preeminent Gift-user had been in contact since an early age, they shared a particularly close bond; it went beyond formality and custom.

“Thank you for your lenient handling of the situation. Also, Prince Takaihito, I’ve heard you’ve received a Divine Revelation.”

“Indeed. You’re aware of the seal around the Burial Grounds being broken, yes?”

So that’s what this is about. Kiyoka furrowed his eyebrows.

Divine Revelation was a type of supernatural ability passed down through the direct imperial line.

This Gift would give the user advanced warning from the gods about disasters that would befall the nation.

In other words, precognition.

Using their Gift, emperors throughout the ages would learn of threats to their country and either avoid them or take great pains to keep casualties at a minimum.

In truth, there was no way of knowing if these divine messages were indeed the work of the gods. What was certain, however, was the history of Gift-users obeying these Divine Revelations as part of their duties and using the information to combat Grotesqueries.

Takaihito was the reigning emperor's second son, but since the eldest hadn't inherited the Divine Revelation, it was nearly a given that Takaihito would take the throne. Such was the importance of the Gift of Divine Revelation.

At present, the reigning emperor was in poor health. Takaihito was using Divine Revelation in his stead to give directives to Kiyoka and the others.

"Take care… A battle is coming. If things go poorly, lives will be lost."

Kiyoka solemnly took in Takaihito's words, alarmed.

Death was inevitable in battle, but for Takaihito to call him here and warn him directly meant the danger was indeed dire. This almost never happened.

"When you say some will perish, who exactly will that be?"

"Hmm. Since I have yet to ascend to the throne, my powers are still unstable. That is all that was shown to me."

"…Understood. In any case, the threat itself is certain?"

"Yes."

Kiyoka knew this situation needed to be treated with the utmost caution.

If he and the other people in this room were in peril, that meant the innocent and unaware citizens were in far greater danger.

Ookaito and Kazushi swallowed hard as they listened, steeling their nerves.

"I'll contact you if I have any other visions."

"Thank you very much, Prince Takaihito."

"Oh yes. One more thing, Kiyoka."

Just as Kiyoka thought their meeting had been adjourned, Takaihito stopped him.

"What is it?"

"I've heard you're engaged. At long last."

Not this again. Kiyoka had grown a bit weary of the topic. Just as it had with Ookaito, this subject would always come up whenever he met with an acquaintance.

He had gotten quite sick of replaying the same conversation over and over.

"Your fiancée… Well, I am sure things will be quite trying from here on out."

"Trying?"

"But knowing you, I am confident you will be fine."

Takaihito spoke with an entertained giggle.

"Is that another Divine Revelation?"

The precognitive imperial prince didn't provide an answer to Kiyoka's question.

Given their long relationship together, Kiyoka knew that Takaihito wasn't apt to explain every single thing to him.

"…I will keep that in mind."

With these words, the three men's audience with Takaihito ended. Their minds consumed by thoughts of all the possible futures on the horizon, they left the imperial residence behind.

⚜ *CHAPTER 2* ⚜

The Chestnut-Haired Man

Hazuki's tutelage was quite strict; she usually came by every other day.

"There, don't slouch your back like that. Focus on trying not to make your body look smaller."

Following her suggestion, Miyo immediately stretched out her back. She pulled her shoulders behind her slightly to try and puff out her chest, then practiced walking up and down the corridors of the house, being careful to maintain her posture.

Miyo was always prone to hanging her head, and she was quick to cast her eyes to the floor. When she did, her body would naturally bend with it, which gave her a gloomy and melancholic impression overall.

"A party is a place to mingle. You can't do that if you come off as dark and dreary to whoever you talk to. First, we need to change that posture of yours. To be honest, it simply screams 'lack of confidence.'"

"Okay."

Miyo had asked Hazuki to arrange a full-length mirror for her, which was set up in her room.

Whenever she had a spare moment, Miyo would examine her posture in the mirror, always checking to make sure she was carrying herself as Hazuki had instructed.

"When you're talking with someone, if the topic ever turns to something you're totally unfamiliar with, just nod along and smile.

Especially if the man you're with loves to talk. Most of the time, they don't really care as long as someone will listen to them… When you do this, raise up the corners of your mouth and squint your eyes a little. A subtle grin is more than enough."

"Like this?"

"You're too stiff," Hazuki instantly responded with her critique as Miyo tried following her instructions.

"Think back to when you actually smiled. If you make an unnatural expression, it could actually hurt the feelings of whoever you're conversing with instead."

"Okay."

Then, during another one of their lessons…

Plates used for Western food, forks, knives, spoons, and glasses were laid out on their usual low dining table.

"We're supposed to be treated to a light meal at this party. You'll need a bare minimum understanding of how to use the utensils, okay?"

Immediately, Hazuki began listing off different instructions and warnings.

Miyo needed to avoid making noise when using her utensils. Additionally, she would have to ensure she didn't flip over her glass from the weight of the drink inside it.

"Make sure not to have any alcohol that day, okay? If you're not used to it, you're asking for a fiasco."

"Okay."

Nodding along, Miyo committed everything she was told to memory.

Hazuki taught her a number of other things as well.

From simple greetings in foreign languages, to coping techniques when someone backed you into a corner, to methods of introducing yourself, and the established rules of polite conversation. Each was full of subtle nuances, and learning them all at once was quite difficult.

Miyo recorded what she learned in a notebook so she wouldn't forget. She made sure to look over it whenever she had a spare moment, reenacting the situations over and over again in her head.

However, her time was limited. Though Yurie came to the house to help, Miyo couldn't completely abandon her domestic tasks, either.

During the day, she studied on her own like this while she finished her chores, and once Hazuki swung by, it was time for more of her strict instruction. Reviewing what she'd learned and preparing for her next lesson typically happened at night.

With her constant nightmares persisting unabated, she inevitably got fewer and fewer hours of sleep.

"…Miyo?"

"…Oh, um, y-yes…?"

Hazuki's voice snapped Miyo back to her senses.

Miyo and Hazuki, together with Yurie, were out in town on an early August day.

Hazuki claimed it would serve as a nice change of pace, but the true goal of the excursion was to provide Miyo with some practice outside the house to make use of what she had learned.

Miyo had intended on ruminating over her lessons while they traveled by car into town, but she had been vacantly staring off into space instead.

“Your face looks awfully pale. Are you feeling unwell?”

“Yes, oh, um, no, I mean… I’m okay.”

Miyo racked her fogged brain and managed a reply.

Her nightmares were only getting worse, and it seemed as if her diligent studying had further aggravated them.

“It’s useless to try reviewing now.”

“Nobody’s going to accept a sham noblewoman like you.”

Everyone would berate her in her dreams. Her father, her stepmother, Kaya—sometimes even Yurie, Hazuki, and Kiyoka—would turn their backs on her. No matter how hard she would deny what they’d said, cling to them, and tearfully plead with them, nothing could dissuade them.

If she was being honest, the lingering despondency she felt upon waking was not something she could easily endure. It seemed as though her entire existence was meaningless; sometimes, she even thought that everything would be easier if she were dead.

It’s not all worthless, though… I can do it. I just know it…

Every time she was rejected in her dreams, she threw herself further into her studies, believing she had to prove her nightmares wrong. Even if it all came back to torment her in her dreams later, she couldn’t give in now.

“Miyo. I’m sure it’ll sound strange coming from your teacher, but you shouldn’t work too hard, okay? Impatience isn’t going to get you anywhere. You’re making big strides, I promise. So don’t push yourself too far now, got it?”

“…I understand.”

“I’m worried, too, Miss Miyo. You haven’t been having much during your meals. You need to eat to stay healthy.”

“I’m sorry.”

Miyo hung her head at their successive chiding.

She was aware that her body was crying out in pain and that her painful nightmares were abnormal.

At the same time, however, she was acutely cognizant of the fact she wasn’t very clever. There was a mere month and a half left until the party, and she wouldn’t be able to keep up the barest of appearances without studying for all she was worth.

Summer in the imperial capital was swelteringly hot. The sunlight blazed down on the paved roadways.

The sides of the streets were lined with banners advertising ice cream pops, carbonated drinks, and other items to help keep cool. People dressed lightly in white and pastel-colored Western clothes and kimonos stood out from the crowd, while others were taking respite in the shade underneath the eaves of the buildings.

Their automobile stopped outside the urban area. Hot, stuffy air enveloped Miyo as she stepped out. It had felt nice and cool with the window open while they’d been in the car, but it was obvious that wouldn’t be the case once they stopped. A parasol or fan would be indispensable.

When the three exited the vehicle, the chauffer declared he would be back later to pick them up and departed.

“Okay then, let’s finish things up fast and get back home quick.”

“Um, Hazuki? I’m okay, I promise…”

Miyo indirectly implied she didn’t want to let the rare opportunity go to waste, but Hazuki rejected her immediately.

“Absolutely not. You’re not fooling anybody with that pale face of yours. You’ll take a good, long rest when you get back, understand?”

"…I do."

Miyo reluctantly nodded at the emphatic reminder.

The three of them all aimlessly walked around town together.

Aimless walking implied a degree of carelessness, but the actual circumstances were anything but. Miyo focused her full attention on each and every step she took, forcing herself to maintain a proper posture.

She also occasionally dipped her head into the shops along the streets, exchanging light greetings with the staff and asking simple questions while making sure not to take up too much of their attention. This was practice for talking with strangers while smiling.

"Well, that was very good, I'd say. Well done."

After walking around for a while, they entered one of the shops to take a break. Miyo sighed with relief at the appraisal Hazuki made on the way inside.

"Thank you very much."

"You were still really pushing yourself, though, weren't you? I told you earlier, but you can't be impatient. If you fall ill before the important party, then it'll all be for nothing."

Hazuki's warning was reasonable, and in her mind, Miyo knew what she was saying was true.

Perhaps it was due to the heat, but her thoughts were more scattered and in disarray than usual. She had a hard time getting her words out.

Beads of sweat slid smoothly down her temple.

"…I don't know. I try over and over, but I'm still not confident, and…?"

I have to say something.

As she tried to express her thoughts, it happened. For a brief and sudden instant, everything before her eyes went black.

“Miyo?”

Hazuki’s questioning voice. Though Miyo could hear it, the other woman sounded distant.

Miyo didn’t know what was happening. Her legs were shaking unsteadily, and she was losing her balance. She couldn’t stay upright.

Ah……

Readying herself for her collapse, she squeezed her eyes tight.

“Whoa there.”

Yet her slanting body collided with something hard. The voice of a young man came from behind her.

Wrapped in a refreshing scent of perfume, she realized that someone was holding up her body to keep her from falling over, and she instantly went pale.

“M-my apologies!”

Separating herself in a flurry, Miyo bowed deeply without even looking at the face of the person who had caught her fall.

Oh no. Now my absentmindedness is causing trouble for strangers, too…!

Her heart pounded. Frantically holding down her fingers to stop them from trembling, she again gave another apology.

“It’s okay, please raise your head.”

Their tone was flustered. Relieved that the person wasn’t angry at her, Miyo timidly straightened out her upper body.

Standing before her was exactly who the voice had suggested—a young man.

Though he wasn't tall, his figure was slender and lean, and his mildly wavy chestnut hair was arranged neatly. From his white shirt covered with a vest and bound with a necktie, he appeared to be an office worker of some kind. He had kindhearted features, and at the moment, he gave her an awkward smile.

"I'm all right. I'm simply glad you appear uninjured yourself."

"…It was my own carelessness that made this happen. I'm truly sorry for causing you trouble."

"Please, allow me to apologize as well."

Hazuki stepped forward from beside Miyo and gave a beautifully constructed bow.

"Thank you very much for catching her fall. I dare not think what would have happened if you hadn't passed by."

"Please, please, you're exaggerating. No one was injured anyway, so it's quite all right really."

Unmoved by Hazuki's polite gratitude, the young man displayed equally courteous decorum.

"Please be careful. That was dangerous. You could end up injured next time."

"You're right. Thank you."

"I'll be on my way, then."

The kind young man gave a light bow and walked off.

Miyo watched him depart with feelings both of gratitude and regret. Beside her, Hazuki whispered, "I wonder who that was."

"What?"

"He wore a well-cut suit, and he seemed accustomed to the situation. I'm not familiar with him myself, but he perhaps comes

from a noble family…? Wait, that's not important right now! Miyo, are you all right? Are you hurt? Are you in pain?"

"I-I'm fine right now…"

As always, there was an intense difference between Hazuki's elegant and refined air and the moments when she behaved like an innocent child.

Although she was much more used to it now, Miyo was overwhelmed by the abrupt and masterful switch, so she simply nodded along.

"Honestly, you scared me! This is all my fault, leading you around under the hot sun like this without taking your health into account…"

"N-not at all! I tripped because of my own carelessness, simple as that."

"But still."

Given the situation, it was far too difficult to believe she had simply tripped.

Miyo didn't want to believe her condition was bad enough to result in a collapse. She was in the middle of studying with Hazuki. Resting here for a while would waste time.

She had intended to come off firm and resolute, but Hazuki's eyes swirled with anxiety and doubt.

Silence fell over them for a moment.

"Miss Miyo, Miss Hazuki."

Amid the hustle and bustle of the city, they heard Yurie break the quiet of the group in a dispassionate voice drained of emotion. It was unlike anything Miyo had heard before.

"There is something I would like to talk about with you both. You'll hear me out, of course, yes?"

Her tone had the same gentleness it always did, but her ill-concealed anger was leaking through.

Instantly, Miyo and Hazuki both readied themselves for the incoming lecture.

“Pleasure to meet you, Commander Kudou. My name is Arata Tsuruki.”

Ookaito had used his connections to dispatch someone to receive Kiyoka by the Ministry of the Imperial Household.

When Kiyoka met him in the reception room, the young man introduced himself with an innocuous smile. Kiyoka gazed at him just long enough not to be considered rude and thought to himself.

Arata Tsuruki. Twenty-four years old.

His family ran a midsized trading company. Tsuruki Trading, established post-Restoration, had recovered from the brink of bankruptcy following declining business twenty years ago and was now enjoying stability. As a son of that distinguished family, this man lacked neither in his education nor other such facets of his person.

Although Kiyoka had done some more digging on the man apart from the information Ookaito had given him, he’d turned up nothing about Arata being employed with the Imperial Household. Kiyoka’s investigations ended before he could understand what connection had caused him to be dispatched here.

In the flesh, Arata’s first impression wasn’t a bad one.

The kindhearted smile on his fine features disarmed all wariness. His wavy chestnut hair matched well with his high-quality suit. It looked quite natural on him.

Despite this, something about the man was inconsistent, and it made Kiyoka suspect that something about him was distorted and crooked.

“Kiyoka Kudou. I’m the acting commander of this Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.”

“I am aware. You are very well known in high society… They say you’re colder than the Arctic, never letting women get near you.”

Kiyoka silently narrowed his eyes at Arata’s slightly discourteous way of speaking.

It was either cheap provocation, or he was testing something. It was also possible there was no deeper implication, but Kiyoka was unable to pick up anything from the man’s guileless smile.

“Spare me the gossip. I only want to hear about the Burial Grounds.”

“Ah, yes, of course. Sorry. In that case—”

With an unrepentant apology, Arata immediately broached the main topic of their meeting.

“Someone lifted the seals on the Burial Grounds around two weeks ago in the middle of the night. Ever since, the Ministry of the Imperial Household has been rushing to identify the culprit and recover the souls that have been released. However, only seventy percent of the loosed spirits have been recovered, and we are still unsure who may have been the culprit.”

“…Why did the Ministry of the Imperial Household suddenly decide to give us information on this? Normally, their lips would be sealed.”

“There are very few practitioners within the Ministry of the Imperial Household. As the seventy percent recovery rate makes clear, they don’t have enough people. Guess it finally dawned on the top brass of the Ministry.”

A terribly complacent explanation.

The Ministry would have been aware that they lacked the necessary personnel from the start. The souls of almost every Gift-user that failed to pass on were gathered and laid to rest within the Burial Grounds. Whether every single spirit in the Burial Grounds had escaped the Forbidden Land or not, there was still a massive number who had.

Now there was a high chance that those souls, filled with hatred, would attack populated settlements en masse and leave casualties in their wake.

“You’re saying the Ministry’s finally given up dealing with this under wraps and are appealing to us for help?”

“Sure. You’re free to interpret things that way.”

“I see,” Kiyoka replied tepidly, before hitting Arata with the question that had been bothering him.

“I get what’s going on here. We’ll cooperate. There are people’s lives at stake. That said, and pardon me for the rude inquiry, but what circumstances led you here? As far as I know, you’re not Ministry staff.”

He was certainly not involved with the military, and Kiyoka hadn’t heard anything about the Tsuruki family, or Arata himself, possessing the Gift.

It was the one thing Kiyoka couldn’t banish from his mind.

While he knew the broad strokes of Arata’s background, Kiyoka wouldn’t be able to trust the man without first confirming what sort of position he had in all of this.

“I thought you’d ask,” Arata replied to the blunt question with an insincere grin.

“Well, I suppose only a truly helpless idiot wouldn’t be curious… I’m what you would call a negotiator. Usually I take part in negotiations for my family’s trading firm, but occasionally a friend calls on me to handle these sorts of jobs as well. My primary role is to get across what others have a hard time saying themselves.”

“If that’s the case, you still seem awfully knowledgeable about the Burial Grounds and Gift-users.”

“That’s my negotiation skills at work. Whether it’s all bluffing or knavery, it’s vital I make the other party believe I am well informed. I can’t do my job if people snub their noses at me for being ignorant.”

“I see.”

Watching Kiyoka nod, Arata grinned.

“Researching who you’ll be negotiating with is the most fundamental aspect of the trade. I know a little bit about you, too, Commander Kudou. Like how you got engaged recently, for instance. Though, of course, that tidbit’s already made the rounds, so it didn’t take much investigation.”

“I bet.”

Though he didn’t attend many parties, even Kiyoka had a good idea how widespread the news had become.

“I’m really quite envious. I’d love to find a good partner for myself and settle down, but it’s never quite so easy… Marriage is a difficult business, I’m afraid.”

For a brief moment, Arata’s gaze grew pointed.

Kiyoka felt a prickliness in the tone of what was ostensibly a harmless conversation. He felt a sort of rebellious antagonism directed his way, not to the degree of open hostility, but…the next moment, the previous innocuous smile returned to his face.

Despite this inexplicable feeling, Kiyoka sensed the difference in information between the two put him at a disadvantage, so he let the moment go by without comment.

“At any rate, since we have been officially commissioned, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit will take part in dealing with this matter. Does the Minister of the Imperial Household have any specifications for recovering the lost souls?”

“A specialized magical apparatus is used to recover them. But there seems to be a lot of souls with an aggressive all-consuming grudge wandering around, so depending on the situation, you’re permitted to both battle with supernatural abilities and extinguish the specters. If anything, the Ministry and the emperor seem to prefer the latter. Leaving those irritants around will only lead to more serious incidents like this down the line… The details are outlined in this document, so please look it over. The decree is right here. It’s now an official military order, passed through Major General Ookaito.”

Arata produced several documents from the bag sitting beside him.

Since they would be facing the spirits of Gift-users, it naturally meant the ancestors of Kiyoka’s men were counted among them. The dead remaining behind in the world of the living, though, were nothing but a nuisance. It wasn’t strange for the emperor to order them all exterminated instead.

It was the living who should be held in high regard whenever possible, not the dead.

“Understood.”

Kiyoka briefly ran his eyes over the documents lined up in front of him, and he politely accepted them.

“Also, they plan to have me act as their liaison, so I’ll be peeking in every now and again. I look forward to working with you.”

“Ah, sure. Looking forward to it.”

After exchanging a few more words back and forth, Arata started to head on his way.

While the atmosphere between them had been friendly and without trouble from beginning to end, Arata’s final words as he left—

“Well then, Commander Kudou, I wish you the best of luck. Until next time.”

—had a subtle edge to Kiyoka’s ears.

When he returned to his office from the reception room, there was a tightly bound stack of papers waiting for him.

This is going to be rough.

In addition to their normal duties, with the Burial Grounds incident, he had made his unit members take shifts patrolling and gathering information every night.

Unable to foist everything on his subordinates, Kiyoka was also doing as much as he could himself, which put a large strain on him.

Moreover.

There’s the Usuba family situation, too.

It was heartbreaking watching Miyo suffer in her sleep night in and night out. The mental fatigue was beginning to take a toll on Kiyoka, too.

He wanted to do something for her. Yet he had absolutely no idea how to approach the problem. To make things worse, Miyo herself didn’t talk about it at all, leaving him at a loss.

His impatience worsened as she grew weaker by the day; he was worried she could waste away at any moment.

Kiyoka picked out one of the sheets from the bundle of documents—an interim report on an investigation into the Usuba family that he had personally commissioned a private investigator to gather.

As of now, his goal was to contact the Usubas. He wanted to know where they were.

He couldn't check official records or ask around, so his only option was to steadily track them through their personal relationships. Consequently, he arranged for the private investigator to look into the background of Miyo's mother, Sumi Usuba.

"I'll need some time, mind you."

The private investigator had said with a sour face when he accepted Kiyoka's commission.

The *Usuba* surname was shrouded in mystery, so it was futile to look into it. With no other choice, Kiyoka asked the private investigator to first search through the directories of girls' schools for students named *Sumi*.

There were just over twenty.

Next, the private investigator narrowed this group by factoring in the period of time when Sumi was likely being instructed. After restricting the search to schools within the imperial capital, they broadly investigated the background of any remaining Sumis. That list was now in Kiyoka's hands.

Unfortunately, the results were less than ideal.

Her physical characteristics proved unreliable. A description of "black hair and refined features" alone fit with too many of the other girls. On top of that, there wasn't any conclusive evidence that Sumi Usuba lived in the imperial capital in the first place, or that she had attended girls' school, making direct identification impossible.

Suddenly, the young man Kiyoka had just met with appeared in the back of his mind.

Tsuruki? Wait a minute, I think I remember…

Realizing something, Kiyoka flipped through the list. Finding the page he was looking for, he read through it carefully.

I was right…

Was this all coincidence or purposefully orchestrated?

While he couldn't be certain either way, it seemed important to investigate the strange connection.

A few days passed after Miyo nearly fainted in the city streets.

The heat was unbearable as ever, and her nightmares continued to rob her of her sleep.

Ever since the day in town, my study time's been cut down a bit, too…

When they returned home that day, Yurie gave both Miyo and Hazuki a tongue-lashing about the importance of taking care of one's body. As a result, Hazuki's tutelage became a bit more lenient.

The nightmare-induced insomnia continued, and the accumulating fatigue furthered her body's downward trajectory. Lately, her thoughts had become vague, and her moments of absentmindedness grew in frequency.

I can't stay like this. It's time to make lunch.

Miyo lightly shook her head and focused on what her hands were doing.

Yurie, Miyo, and Hazuki all sat around the dining table.

With their appetites drained by the heat, Miyo prepared a simple dish of *chazuke*.

Dividing up the leftover cold rice from breakfast among their rice bowls, she placed pulled pieces of grilled salmon on top, poured over warm bonito broth, and lightly seasoned the dish with salt and soy sauce. To finish it all off, she sprinkled on some shredded dry seaweed. Afterward, she garnished them with the pickled plums Yurie had prepared and laid the bowls out on the table.

“Gosh, this looks delicious!”

“Sorry it’s so simple.”

“I don’t mind at all. Thanks, Miyo.”

Though the meal was clearly slapdash, Hazuki’s eyes gleefully sparkled at the sight.

“You’re truly a very skilled cook, Miss Miyo.”

“You’re exaggerating…”

Miyo shook her head, unable to endure Yurie’s excessive praise. But Hazuki then echoed the maid’s words as she gazed into the contents of her bowl.

“Isn’t she? It’s incredible, really. I hate to admit it, but I can’t cook for the life of me.”

Putting their hands together, the three gave thanks for the food before picking up their spoons.

The rice was fully soaked in the broth, and when they brought it to their mouths together with the loose pieces of salmon, the gentle warmth and salty flavor seeped through their whole bodies. The sour flavor of the pickled plum added more complexity to the dish, so it was easy to tirelessly slurp down the meal, even in the hunger-sapping summer heat.

“*Mmm!* Just as delicious as I thought!”

“I’m glad it’s to your liking.”

“Miss Miyo’s talented culinary skills make me quite proud, too.”

“Y-you’re exaggerating…”

The praise was beyond excessive for simply pouring bonito broth over a bowl of rice.

Miyo had the opposite reaction and suspected there was some ulterior motive behind the praise. Though she knew Yurie and Hazuki were definitely not the type to think up nasty things like that.

Hazuki complained about herself as she deliberately took in the flavor of the *chazuke*.

“I really am awful in the kitchen. This may seem simple for you, Miyo, but I don’t think I could ever be able to do the same.”

“Really?”

“That’s right. Even at girls’ school, my cooking grades were so abysmal, they dragged down my other subjects with them.”

Yurie forced a smile as she nodded along: “Ah yes, I do remember that, now that you mention it.”

“I’d char anything I grilled, make mush out of whatever I had to boil, and turn everything I stirred together into slush. I’d end up with cuts on my fingers within minutes of picking up a knife, every time.”

Hazuki sighed. “Unbelievable, right?”

Miyo didn’t know what to say in response to Hazuki’s heights of culinary failure.

According to Hazuki, household studies commanded a large portion of the coursework, and among them, needlework was given the most

priority. Students unskilled with needlework weren't entirely unheard of, but they were very few and far between.

Conversely, in courses on cooking or other subjects, there was quite a difference in ability from student to student.

Though most of the women who attended girls' school hailed from wealthy families, there still weren't many households who employed their own servants. Daughters from families with servants didn't have many opportunities to use the skills they worked so hard to learn in school, and thus didn't retain them well. Meanwhile, daughters from families without servants would handle household tasks daily and naturally master the skills they'd learned.

In the case of the Kudous, Hazuki was a firm example of the former.

"Of course, there are always some exceptions. I had a woman from an extremely high-class family enjoy cooking for herself as a hobby."

"Really… That's quite something."

"It is. Still, it's always best if you can take care of the house. Why, I've regretted not being more diligent about practicing what I learned many, many times."

"Really?"

"…Ready to hear the dirty details?"

Hazuki smiled impishly at Miyo, cocking her head.

Miyo knew she must have been referring to her failed marriage. Divorce was not a common occurrence, and Hazuki surely endured a tough time both before and after because of it.

Miyo wouldn't have asked Hazuki about it out of mere curiosity. But since she'd now been given the opportunity to pick the brain of a marriage veteran, she did want to take advantage.

"Are you sure it's all right if I ask?"

“Of course! I don’t mind.”

With this, their conversation unexpectedly turned to a brief recounting of Hazuki’s past.

“I was seventeen when I got married.”

For Hazuki Kudou, marriage had been an obligation, much like it was for many daughters from respectable families. And naturally, no matter whom her parents chose for her, she didn’t complain.

Hazuki had a reputation for being talkative and impulsive from a young age, but she performed extremely well in school and demonstrated skill at any art or craft she learned, and there was nothing to criticize about her looks, either. Her sole deficit, namely, that she wasn’t very good at housework—with her cooking skills being particularly catastrophic—didn’t come across as a critical deficiency.

As such, nobody in their wildest dreams could have imagined her marriage would actually fail.

“I never considered the possibility myself, either. The other servants and I boasted about serving a lady like her.”

Yurie placed a hand on her cheek, recalling days long past, prompting a chuckle from Hazuki.

“Oh, come now, Yurie. Really?”

“Yes, of course!”

Seeing Yurie strangely beaming with pride, Miyo couldn’t help smiling herself.

“Anyway, my marriage was valuable politically, and my husband’s house welcomed me with open arms at first, too.”

Miyo didn't have much experience interacting with other people until now, so she couldn't understand how things ended up going so poorly.

Hazuki's former husband had been in the military and was ten years her senior.

A political marriage to strengthen relations between a family of Gift-users and military personnel. Though she couldn't refuse the arrangement, Hazuki claimed she was fine with it either way.

"My husband wasn't much to look at, but he was very kind. A good, honest man. I even felt lucky. I had heard so many awful stories of girls being sent to marry downright pigs."

A look of sorrow came across Hazuki's face as she muttered, "I was happy."

"Did you get along well with him?"

Miyo asked without thinking, prompting Hazuki to reply.

"Absolutely. I really did like him. I don't think he disliked me, either, exactly. We never fought with each other."

"That sounds lovely."

"Thank you."

Hazuki lived together with her husband and his family at his residence. And though her married life had gone smoothly in the beginning, it slowly but surely tore at the seams.

"Well, my husband's family started to get annoyed with the way I saw things and my inability to do any housework. They started peppering me with nitpicky complaints."

"No…"

"I'd hear, 'Don't you ever shut up?' or 'It's ridiculous you don't know how to cook'—stuff like that. I never even considered things

would end up like that, so I was more depressed than I'd ever been. I thought it was over for me."

Friction between a wife and her mother-in-law was a common tale, and that was how it was with Hazuki.

Her husband's family had great expectations for her. But even Hazuki wasn't without her own flaws. Their expectations of a pristine, perfect wife made her flaws all the more apparent.

Hazuki gave birth to a son after two years. In the excitement over birthing an heir for her husband, and while enthusiasm was high, peace came to Hazuki as well, but as the excitement died down, everything went back to how it was before. Eventually she could no longer handle the pressure of raising a child for the first time along with the harsh treatment she received from her husband's parents and relatives.

"Every night I would burst into tears for no reason. My husband would console me, but ultimately, the situation never changed. Then, one day, my husband said to me—"

Hazuki broke off for a moment from her dispassionate retelling, smiling slightly.

"Do you know what he said to me? 'We're divorcing.' Not *maybe we should*, but *we are*. When I heard that, I was furious that he would just decide that for himself. We snapped back and forth at each other, and by the end, it was a huge row. I got carried away, and before I knew it, our split was official."

"I don't know what to say…"

Miyo was surprised to hear that Hazuki was already a mother of one at such a young age, but the lightning-fast divorce drama was a shock, too.

But when Miyo considered how Hazuki talked and acted with her up until now, it all started to add up.

“I returned to my own family and cooled off a bit, but I had so many regrets. I’d abandoned my own husband and child, just because someone told me he wanted to divorce. I should have worked harder. If I’d only practiced more, I may have even learned how to cook, but…”

“……”

“That’s why I have a lot of respect for you, Miyo. You’re not trying to overlook your own shortcomings but overcome them before you get married instead. That’s not easy.”

Unsure how to respond, Miyo cast her eyes down.

Now that she’d heard Hazuki’s story, her confidence was shrinking faster and faster. In her mind, she was filled with flaws and deficiencies far beyond any of Hazuki’s shortcomings.

“Miyo.”

“…Yes?”

Hearing her name, Miyo lifted her head. Waiting for her was a warm and gentle smile.

“I think what’s most important is to do what you can in the moment, give everything you’ve got, but then be true to your own feelings. Since you always put your whole heart into whatever you do, the former goes without saying, right? So think more about the latter part for me. What do you want to do going forward? How do you want to live?”

Both Hazuki’s optimistic expression and the words she spoke dazzled Miyo with their radiance.

If only she could be more like her. Then she might get closer to being a woman suitable to stay at Kiyoka’s side. But she was so full of

faults and shortcomings right now, she was unsure that would ever come to pass.

She had, in fact, realized something as she listened to Hazuki's story.

I…

It was important for her to cover her weak points. That was without question. But there was something beyond her own shortcomings that Miyo still lacked.

I don't even understand what family really is.

Miyo had never lived with a real family. What would happen if, going forward, she married Kiyoka and met his parents or relatives? What if they had a child?

What good would she be then when things hadn't even gone smoothly with her own blood?

Before, Hazuki had told Miyo to rely on her now that they were going to be family. But—

How do I do that?

She didn't have a clue how "families" were supposed to be.

It was only natural she had a hard time understanding concepts such as *good wife, wise mother* or *the ideal wife*. The word *family* meant little to her. Nothing more than a hollow bit of vocabulary, an out-of-reach fantasy.

She wasn't in one of her nightmares, yet it felt as if everything before her eyes were painted over with darkness.

"Miyo?"

She forced a smile as she replied to Hazuki's questioning glance toward her.

“I…I’ve really never thought about any of that. But there’s one thing I know for sure.”

“What’s that?”

“I want to stay here. Stay here with Kiyoka,” she consciously asserted aloud. So as not to give in to her darkened mind.

It was the one thing she absolutely wouldn’t waver on. She would do anything to ensure she could stay. While she still may have had nothing to offer him, she didn’t want to give up.

“A fantastic response. That boy really is lucky that you care about him so much.”

Hazuki smiled with the serene face of a mature woman.

“All right, then, shall we get back to studying? This conversation ended up being very long, didn’t it?”

“Okay.”

Miyo stood up to get ready for her lesson.

The summer nights were pleasant and cool.

After washing off the day’s sweat in the bath, Miyo saw a figure on the veranda as she returned to her room. Neatly dressed in a summery *yukata*-style kimono, Kiyoka wore his long hair unbound, hanging down his back. This was unusual for him.

He really does seem exhausted.

As he vacantly stared off into the distance, he looked all out of sorts.

While he’d taken night shifts before, the evenings he spent out of the house had been growing in number as of late, and the few words

he spoke to her were growing even more infrequent. With Kiyoka constantly exhausted and sighing, she couldn't bring herself to mention her nightmares to him, so she continued to drag her feet on bringing it up.

I have to hang in there.

She certainly couldn't impart her own pain and suffering to someone who clearly looked so worn-out.

Miyo made up her mind and, after quickly finishing up preparations in the kitchen, quietly approached Kiyoka as he gazed up at the slightly waning moon.

"May I join you?"

"Yeah."

Feeling a bit relieved by his approval, she put down the tray she'd brought with her and sat down beside him.

Only then did Kiyoka turn to look at Miyo.

"…What's that?"

"Um, tea, and pickled vegetables…?"

Kiyoka examined the tray before asking, prompting Miyo to tilt her head as she replied.

She began to regret the gesture to her exhausted fiancé and had assumed he'd thought it was uncalled for, but it appeared she was mistaken.

"…I'll have some."

"Oh, here."

Relying on the light of the moon, she poured hot liquid out of the teapot into their cups. The fragrance of barley wafted around them.

This time, she had tried changing things around from the usual green tea she served.

“Barley tea?”

“That’s right. I thought it was a good opportunity to enjoy something summery. The pickled cucumbers and eggplant are very good, too, so, um… Would you give them a try?”

She heard it had been a good harvest year, so she’d gotten her hands on heaps of fresh vegetables. Between bouts of studying, Miyo had worked diligently with Yurie to pickle and preserve them.

The vegetables were just about fully done, so Miyo considered gradually adding them to their meals, starting with the next day’s breakfast.

Kiyoka brought a slice of the cucumber to his mouth, a loud crunch resounding with each bite.

“Tasty.”

“…I’m glad to hear it.”

Time slowly flowed on as they briefly sat in silence.

Kiyoka was the first to break the stillness. He seemed hesitant and looked extremely unsure of himself.

“Miyo, um, well…”

“What is it?”

“Sorry for being so busy. I’ve been swamped with work.”

“No need to apologize…”

Kiyoka was the commander of his unit, a splendid position. The role came with a lot of responsibility, which Miyo was sure made him very busy. She’d forgotten that it hadn’t been very long since she’d arrived here.

That being said, Miyo would be lying if she claimed she hadn't been lonely. It was difficult to deal with the nightmares tormenting her every night, agonizing to feel her way through the darkness. Being on her own made her heart ache.

She squeezed her bitterly cold fingertips. A dull pain throbbed in her head.

"Keep working hard. I'm fine on my own."

"Are you sure?"

"What?"

"Is anything bothering you? If you want to talk to me about something, I'll listen."

It felt as if his narrow gaze pierced right through her.

Should I speak with him now…? No, I can't.

She managed to wrest herself away from her momentary inclination.

Miyo knew if she told him, Kiyoka would try to do something to help her. But she shouldn't force that responsibility on someone who was already having a difficult time as it was.

All she had to do was endure the best she could. Just a little bit longer, until Kiyoka wasn't so busy.

"I'm…fine. Nothing's bothering me."

"…I see."

Suddenly, Kiyoka averted his gaze and drank from his teacup.

Miyo thought she glimpsed a flash of disappointment in his eyes. Her heart beat with a nervous thump.

"U-um, Kiyoka. Early today, um, Hazuki told me her story."

Frightened, she quickly changed the subject.

Letting out a sigh, Kiyoka went along with the change of topic.

“Sis’s story? You don’t mean about her divorce, do you?”

“Yes, about her divorce. And, well, there was something I wanted to ask you. What sort of person is Hazuki to you, Kiyoka?”

This was a question she truly wanted to ask, not simply a way to work through the awkward change of subject.

Brother and sister connected by blood. Ultimately, Miyo had never been able to understand her half sister, Kaya. But what about Kiyoka? That had been on her mind after listening to Hazuki’s story.

“What sort of person? Hmm, I guess I never really talked to you about it.”

Kiyoka returned his cup, almost emptied of its contents, back to the tray.

As he poured more tea from the pot, the barley fragrance again wafted through the air around them.

“My sister and I have never gotten along. As you know, she’s a bit rowdy, so when I was younger, she was always fussing over and teasing me. Sometimes, she’d really get on my nerves.”

“I can sort of imagine that.”

An image of little Kiyoka and Hazuki messing around came to mind. She was positive they must have made an adorable pair.

“Liking each other, hating each other, those sorts of feelings never really entered into the equation. We were born and raised in the same environment; we understand how the other thinks, which means we’re not really reserved or considerate of one another. Our personalities are like oil and water, but I still think she’s a good person in her own way… Did that answer your question?”

“…It did.”

Jealousy. Miyo felt it from the bottom of her heart.

She was simply envious that Kiyoka could talk about someone else like this.

I really am stupid, aren't I…?

She should've known that hearing his answer would only heighten her loneliness.

There was no outlet for the sudden and overwhelming sense of isolation she felt rise up inside her. Would she continue on like this for her whole life, clinging to fleeting relationships, without ever knowing what it meant to truly have parents and siblings—a family she felt safe and at home with?

There were plenty of people without a family out there in the world. Miyo wasn't the sole exception.

I know. Since coming here, I've learned what the warmth of having a place where you belong can feel like.

Before, confronted with her stepmother and Kaya in the Saimori estate, she thought it would be enough just having a place to stay at Kiyoka's residence, first as his fiancée and then eventually as his wife.

But what about now? Her avarice knew no bounds. She'd started to yearn for not only a place to belong, but his love, too. Thinking that maybe she could truly get a family of her own, regardless of any marriage offers or engagements.

"Miyo. Come a bit closer."

"Closer? Okay."

Just as she was told, she pushed the tray in between them aside and drew near him.

He then took hold of her wrist, peeking out from the sleeve of her *yukata*.

"K-Kiyoka?"

"…If you're lonely, tell me you're lonely. If you're in pain, tell me you're in pain."

"Hng!"

"I won't know unless you convey that to me."

Miyo was at a loss for words.

She wanted to lay everything bare. Miyo felt the exact same way herself. But in the current situation, she couldn't let herself do that.

Miyo didn't want to place any extra stress on Kiyoka, nor did she want to trouble him or make him suffer needlessly. Worse still, she didn't want him to think she was annoying and grow to resent her.

"L-lonely? No, I'm not at all…"

"Really? I am."

"Huh?!"

It couldn't be. Miyo must have misheard him.

Kiyoka's lonely? Because he can't see me? Impossible.

No matter how hard she denied it, a voice in the back of her mind told her she hadn't misheard anything.

Embarrassment rapidly swelled inside her, and she couldn't properly meet the earnest and straightforward visage her fiancé sent her way.

"You're not?"

"I…"

"I?"

Oh, I give up.

Miyo succumbed to his urging.

“I’m lonely…”

At long last, she let out a slim fragment of her truest feelings. Then, returning her averted gaze back just a hairbreadth…her cheeks burned hotter than she could hope to conceal.

Leaned in far closer to her than she had imagined, Kiyoka wore a broad and beautiful smile on his face.

Her heart beat like a drum in her chest.

His smile, illuminated in the pale moonlight, was so lovely that she believed nothing else in the world could compare to its beauty.

“Then say so from the start.”

“…Sorry.”

Kiyoka gave a noisy chuckle at her instinctive apology.

“Still haven’t fix that habit of yours, have you…? Still, when did that start?”

“What?”

“You always used to say, ‘I’m very sorry,’ but now it’s just a simple ‘Sorry.’”

“Oh…!”

Miyo gasped, putting her hand over her mouth.

She said it completely on reflex. It had changed somewhere along the way. Miyo was convinced she had never apologized so casually to him before.

“Wh-what am I going to do…?”

“No need to do anything, is there? It’s fine the way it is.”

“Doesn’t it sound childish? It feels a bit strange to say.”

“The drop in formality just means you’re getting used to living here. Nothing wrong with talking like that in the house.”

If anything, she could stand to relax even more.

As he spoke, Kiyoka pulled Miyo’s shoulder closer to him.

“You can rely on me. Don’t hold back your feelings so much. Be selfish. That way, I can be here for you, take it all in.”

Miyo wasn’t able to give a reply.

Instead, her throbbing headache asserted its presence in her consciousness.

“Is anyone home?”

The voice from the entryway echoed right as the study session with Hazuki had reached a stopping point, and they were talking about taking a short break.

“Well now, I wonder who that could be?”

“I’ll go and greet them.”

“Miss Miyo, please, allow me.”

“It’s okay. I’ll go.”

Stopping Yurie as she tried to leave the living room, Miyo hurried to the entryway.

“Please, pardon the delay…”

Opening the door, she grimaced in the dizzying heat before her eyes widened in surprise.

Standing there was an exceedingly handsome young man. He was slim, had wavy chestnut hair, and was dressed smartly in a shirt and vest.

The cordial smile he wore was one Miyo was familiar with.

“You’re…”

“Oh, what? I’m not mistaken; this is the home of Kiyoka Kudou, right?”

“I-it is.”

Surprised, Miyo wasn’t able to respond.

Did coincidences like this really happen? Miyo never expected to be reunited with the man who had saved her from falling over in town.

The young man furrowed his brows in confusion, tilting his head slightly.

“Is Commander Kudou in right now?”

“I’m sorry, he’s at work today…”

“Huh?! That’s strange; I thought he was off duty today.”

The young man groaned pensively, scratching the back of his head with his hand.

“Actually, that reminds me,” Miyo began, “he was supposed have today off, but he told me things are so busy that he would head in today anyway.”

“Ah, is that so? My apologies. I should have checked.”

The young man’s visit appeared to be related to her fiancé’s job. Lately, Kiyoka had been working without rest. The two had probably just missed each other.

“In that case, the commander must be at the station.”

The young man looked pitiful, drooping his shoulders in disappointment underneath the hot summer sun. Miyo called after him.

“If you’d like, you’re more than welcome to rest for a moment inside.”

After stepping into the living room, the young man downed the glass of water Miyo provided in one gulp, all while facing curious stares from Hazuki and Yurie.

“Thank you. That was a big help.”

“N-not at all. I should thank you for helping me in the city the other day.”

A single glass of water was a cheap way to express her gratitude.

At Miyo’s words, the young man suddenly adjusted his posture, as though remembering something important.

“My name is Arata Tsuruki. Nice to meet you.”

“I am Miyo Saimori.”

She timidly grasped the young man—Arata’s—outstretched hand. The palm returning her grip was warm and gentle.

But while she could have sworn she heard him remark, “It’s so thin…,” just loudly enough to be audible, she convinced herself she must have been mistaken.

“Miss Miyo, then. You must be Kudou’s famous fiancée.”

“Famous…?”

“Indeed. Rumors of your engagement have been running through high society for some time now. I knew a woman was living with him.”

“Is that so…?” Miyo replied, casting her eyes down slightly.

It was an odd feeling, having people out there somewhere talking about her. She felt a bit embarrassed.

“That said…”

“Huh?”

“…I’m disappointed in Commander Kudou, to be honest.”

Arata suddenly muttered in a low voice. Unable to believe her ears, Miyo swiftly raised her head back up again.

“Wh-why do you say that?”

“I’d like to ask that myself. That’s an awfully rude thing to say.”

Hazuki, too, frowned at the remark, feeling obligated to chime in.

Arata didn’t flinch at all. Instead, he narrowed his eyes, sizing her up with his piercing gaze.

“Miss Miyo, do you understand just what sort of complexion is plastered on your face right now?”

“Well…”

Right, Arata already knew for himself. He saw her almost collapse in the street. Her condition had only grown worse since. She was certain her complexion, too, must have been as poor as he was implying.

It made sense for him to distrust her fiancé since they were living under the same roof.

“…It’s not Kiyoka’s fault. I’m the one to blame.”

“Miyo…”

Hazuki called her name, anxious.

Arata huffed, as if annoyed with the answer.

“I went too far. Still, I don’t believe anything I said was incorrect.”

Annoyed, he glanced around at all the corners of the room, which were filled with piles of textbooks and notebooks, before continuing.

“Why, it’s absurd to make you work so hard that you end up this sickly.”

“……”

“Utter nonsense. Surely you have plenty of things you’re capable of. It’s not at all necessary to rush yourself to master a bunch of new skills like this.”

He spoke as if he was aware of everything there was to know about the situation.

Something snapped inside her.

“Stop, please!”

“Stop what?”

“This is something I want to be doing, and both Hazuki and Kiyoka are only going along with my request. Please don’t speak ill of them.”

That was right. All this was a product of her own selfish insistence. Everyone was simply going along with her wishes, and whether she was feeling sickly or not, this was entirely her own responsibility.

She couldn’t sit there and let Arata speak as though Miyo were being educated against her will in spite of her declining health.

Raising her voice again brought on the pain throbbing in her head.

Fortunately, Arata let out a deep sigh and backed down.

“Forgive me. I’ve soured the mood, haven’t I? How inexcusable of me to say such things while you’re courteously letting me rest in your home… I’ll take my leave.”

He quickly stood up, then hastily walked over to the entryway.

“Honestly, *what* was that man’s problem? Coming in here and saying whatever he wants… Wait, Miyo?”

As she listened to Hazuki’s complaints, Miyo also stood up.

“I’ll go and see him off.”

“What?! You don’t have to do that. It’s wasted on a man like him.”

“I can’t do that.”

With weak and wobbly steps, she followed after Arata. When she arrived in the entryway, he had just finished getting his shoes on.

“Miss Miyo?”

“Forgive me. I didn’t mean to lose my temper back in the living room.”

“No need to apologize; I was the one being rude. Please, don’t worry about it.”

When Arata stood to face Miyo, he continued forward, bringing his face up close to her ear.

“I am, however, able to give you a role that only you can fulfill. If you’re interested, you can contact me whenever you want.”

Dumbstruck, Miyo was unable to respond at all before Arata departed without saying another word.

A role that only I can fulfill…?

Distracted by his puzzling words, Miyo failed to notice.

The other parting gift that had been snuck into her *yukata* sleeve.

Afterward, both Hazuki and Yurie stayed rather silent, and with Miyo finding it hard to take an interest in studying, they adjourned their tutoring session early.

Politely declining Yurie's offer to help prepare dinner, Miyo sent her home and stood alone in the kitchen.

A role…just for me. I really don't get it at all.

Arata's parting words occupied Miyo's head, along with a dull pain.

She thought for sure he meant that instead of pushing herself to master the conduct of a noblewoman, Miyo should focus on doing the housework and other such activities properly. Yet the more she thought about it, the stranger it seemed to her that he knew so much about her in the first place.

It was unnatural for someone showing up by coincidence, whom she'd only ever run into twice, to mention giving her an invitation and offering that advice. The way he had acted, it was as though he was implying that he was actually a better fit for her than Kiyoka.

"…yo."

Had she met him before? No, that couldn't be possible. Given Miyo's small number of friends and acquaintances, she would remember him if she had.

"…Miyo."

Not matter what Arata may say to her, though, Miyo absolutely couldn't let herself abandon her lessons. She wouldn't accept being the only one incapable of managing things everyone else could handle.

She didn't want to burden the people she cared about. Instead, she yearned to be someone that Kiyoka would say he was glad to have at his side. Was it so wrong to wish for that future?

"Miyo."

"Eek!"

Hearing her name from behind, Miyo nearly jumped into the air.

When she turned around, she found her stern-faced fiancé leaning against the kitchen doorway.

⚜ *CHAPTER 3* ⚜

To the Usuba Household

A short while earlier.

Kiyoka glared at Arata, who had arrived late to their meeting.

“You’re tardy.”

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

Arata sat down on the reception room sofa, his smiling face showing not even the slightest hint of guilt.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve showing up behind schedule.”

Their meeting wasn’t a particularly important one. It may have been unreasonable to complain about a delay of a few minutes, but Kiyoka was nevertheless irritated.

“I don’t have any excuses. The heat’s made me a bit careless, I think.”

“…I’d still like to hear a reason, if you’ve got one.”

“There was a bit of a misunderstanding on my end. I heard that you were off duty today, Commander Kudou, so I first visited your home instead.”

Kiyoka widened his eyes in surprise.

He was indeed originally scheduled to be off duty today. However, with the movements of the Burial Ground spirits still unclear, he couldn’t afford to relax. Subsequently, he’d relinquished his days off to come in to work.

He assumed these intentions of his had been properly conveyed to Arata as well.

“I see, someone must have forgotten to inform you.”

It appeared that it wasn’t only Kiyoka’s men on the ground who’d fallen into disarray, but also Ookaito and the Ministry of the Imperial Household as well.

Kiyoka sighed.

He couldn’t remember when he’d last spent time at home. Instead, he would return momentarily in the evening to rest for a short while before returning to the station in the middle of the night, and he wouldn’t return home until the following evening.

Sightings of a strange doll, encounters with ghosts…and other such reports. The large number of eyewitness accounts and grievances, whether they involved the Burial Grounds or some other entity, were keeping Kiyoka’s unit busy. They responded to the whole gamut of reports one by one, and then they would separate the wheat—strong information—from the chaff and gather evidence as necessary. Reporting all the minute details to the higher-ups was taxing.

Despite this, he still prioritized sending his subordinates home or making them take breaks, which placed a heavier and heavier burden on Kiyoka’s shoulders instead. This was largely the source of his irritated mood.

He was ashamed that just being busy could make him feel so irritated.

“Well, that’s basically it. Oh yes, I also met your fiancée as well, Commander.”

Kiyoka felt himself twitch at the casual disclosure.

Arata smirked with a spiteful and ridiculing glimmer in his eyes.

“She gave me a courteous reception. I’m not surprised you’ve taken such a fantastic person as your betrothed.”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“Not at all, merely stating a fact… That being said, while I am aware this may be none of my business, I heartily disapprove of treating such a fine woman the way you are now.”

“Excuse me?”

Kiyoka didn’t understand what Arata was insinuating. He furrowed his brows.

“Previously…though, really, it was just a few days ago, I actually crossed paths with Miyo.”

“And?”

“At the time, she looked ready to collapse on the spot. She seemed totally unhealthy, too.”

“……”

“She actually did almost fall over. Luckily, I saved her there on the roadside. And though she looked unwell back then, when I saw her today, it seemed her condition has only grown worse.”

It was the first he’d heard about Miyo being acquainted with Arata, and Kiyoka was displeased that a man whom he was only loosely familiar with was talking about her like this.

Yet Arata’s remark made Kiyoka realize that he had no memory of what Miyo’s complexion had looked like the night prior.

What was it like on that moonlit evening? Or the night before that?

The daily nightmares had worn Miyo down to the bone. She looked haggard enough to wither away at any moment. Despite searching for the Usuba family to try and do something for her as soon as he could, there had been no progress on that front, and with work hounding him, simply returning home to see her was nigh impossible.

A cold sweat ran down his brow.

“Whether you’re busy at work or not, shouldn’t you be more concerned for your fiancée? Ask her what’s wrong, at the very least… Personally speaking, I would never let my betrothed end up like that.”

Under normal circumstances, Kiyoka would have yelled at him to mind his own business. Strangers shouldn’t talk about your fiancée like that.

But those words never left his mouth.

After the meeting with Arata had concluded, Kiyoka finished his work with what little focus he could muster, obtained new conclusive information from a private investigator, and headed home.

The things Arata had said to him that afternoon had been stuck in his mind ever since. But after hearing the facts the investigator had brought to light, now he was sure of everything.

The only thing that couldn’t keep up with the situation was Kiyoka’s own heart.

Once he’d finally arrived home, the usual sight of Miyo coming out into the entryway to greet him was absent for some reason. It did not take him long to find her inside the house, though.

“Miyo.”

He called out to her from behind as she busily worked in the kitchen. But it seemed as though her mind was somewhere else entirely, so she failed to notice.

“Miyo.”

“……”

“Miyo.”

After he called her name for the third time, her hands finally stopped moving, and she turned around with a deeply surprised look on her face.

"K-Kiyoka?"

A glance was all Kiyoka needed to tell she hadn't noticed him return home. Was she that absorbed in what she was doing…? No, that wasn't it.

"…I'm home."

"W-welcome back. Sorry for not coming to greet you…!"

"I don't mind."

Kiyoka stared hard at Miyo as she ran pitter-patter over to where he stood.

Wrapped in a pale turquoise kimono with scattered maple leaves, she truly looked like a noblewoman. Anyone seeing her as she was now would applaud her as a lovely, gentle, and graceful lady.

While he'd been spending more and more time away from home, Miyo's devotion to studying with his older sister had made the figure standing before him look so remarkably different, he almost didn't recognize her.

And yet, despite it all…

"Miyo, why…?"

He couldn't properly spin his next works together.

Kiyoka recalled the last few months.

When Miyo first arrived, she'd been in a terrible state.

Her body had been unhealthily gaunt, nothing more than skin and bones. A pallor clung to her complexion, and her hair and skin had been worn down and battered.

But that was supposed to have all changed for the better. Living out a normal life here should have prevented her from ever entering that wretched state again.

Nevertheless, this was a complete regression.

The color had faded from her cheeks, and dark rings lined her eyes. It was no figment of Kiyoka's imagination that the flesh on her cheeks and wrists, which had taken so long to develop, was now wasting away. It seemed even more pronounced now than it had been on that moonlit evening.

So everything Arata said was right after all.

Something began to simmer inside Kiyoka, slowly rising up to the surface.

"Um…?"

"My sister's study sessions have been pretty strict, then?"

Miyo shook her head at his barbed question.

"No, um, Hazuki is always… She's very considerate—"

"Then what is it?"

Irritated, he caustically demanded an answer.

Kiyoka himself didn't comprehend why he was so annoyed. Before he realized it, he had taken hold of Miyo's arm.

"Kiyoka, I…"

"Why have you gotten so thin? Why are you so absentminded, you don't even notice when I've come home?"

"It's because, um…"

His dissatisfaction intensified as he watched her avoid his gaze.

"You never told me that you've met Arata Tsuruki before."

“U-um…Kiyoka.”

“That’s not all, either. Do you think I don’t know about the horrible dreams you’ve been having night in and night out?”

This was the remark that made Miyo stiffen up, widen her eyes.

No, no, this isn’t how I wanted to broach this conversation.

A contradictory mix of emotions swirled around inside Kiyoka’s chest.

He definitely hadn’t meant to reprimand her, neither about her encounter with Arata, nor about her nightmares. Kiyoka had wanted to take care of her, not hurt her, and bring this up in a different way.

But the moment he voiced the thoughts that had steadily been piling up in his mind, he could no longer stop himself.

“I told you already, didn’t I? Talk to me about anything. Rely on me. Depend on me. Yet no matter how much time we’ve been together, you still won’t confide in me at all.”

“……”

“Do you not trust me then? Is that why you won’t tell me anything?”

“No, of course not…”

Miyo’s voice was trembling severely. When she looked up at Kiyoka, he could see large tears welling up in her eyes.

“I didn’t want to trouble you with anything. You already looked so busy and exhausted, and I didn’t want to worry you with my own problems on top of it all.”

“I’m not exhausted at all. Don’t decide that for yourself.”

“Hng!”

It was a bald-faced lie. He was so ragged right now that even his carefree subordinate, Godou, had picked up on it and ordered him not to return to the station for the rest of the night.

The way Kiyoka saw things, his turning a blind eye toward Miyo's health and his heavy-handed questioning were both consequences of the exhaustion weakening his judgment and restraint.

Caught up in his current momentum, however, he let the following words escape his mouth:

"If this was how things were going to end up, I shouldn't have given you the chance to study at all."

"__"

Stunned, tears spilled from Miyo's eyes, and Kiyoka finally realized his verbal blunder.

The learning Miyo herself had told him she wanted to do. The light in her eyes as she gazed at the piles of textbooks she'd borrowed from Hazuki. When she was with his sister, she always seemed as if she was having fun.

And he had just rejected all of it.

"That's cruel, Kiyoka."

Her tears flowed one after another down her face, soaking the floor below.

Kiyoka regretted his words immensely. Aghast at his own actions, he couldn't manage anything in response.

"I…I only…"

His voice awkwardly trailed off.

Miyo shook violently before she collapsed into his swiftly outstretched arms. She was light as a feather; a shiver ran down his spine.

I'm awful.

He had hurt his fiancée.

Any excuse about this being an accident, or that he'd let his emotions get the better of him, was totally meaningless. She was exhausted and more wounded than anyone he'd known, yet he had hurt her all the same.

He had done the absolute worst thing he could ever do.

Was this any different from her treatment under the Saimoris?

He gathered the unconscious Miyo into his arms.

Guilt gnawing at him, he started to carry her to her room when his downward gaze happened to land on an unfamiliar piece of paper lying on the floor.

"What's this…?"

The words written on the paper fully substantiated Kiyoka's suspicions.

He didn't hesitate in his decision at all. This was the only path to save Miyo and atone for his harsh words.

When she pulled back her slightly puffy eyelids, she was greeted by the ceiling of her room.

Morning? Already…?

A faint light illuminated the room. She heard the warbling of birds outside.

But Miyo didn't remember getting into bed and falling asleep last night.

When she thought back, wondering what had happened, she went pale.

That's right. How could I do that to Kiyoka?

Not only had she lashed out and rudely called him cruel, but she'd also fainted and made him carry her to her room.

She'd carelessly ended up brooding over Arata's words. Miyo was always sure to hear the sounds of Kiyoka's automobile engine, but with her poor health and heavy thoughts, she had been more absentminded and distracted than ever before.

It was the first time she had ever seen Kiyoka get so angry.

At first, she thought he was cross with her for not coming to the door to greet him, but that wasn't it. His face contorted with melancholy, as though ready to burst into tears at any moment.

…Kiyoka was waiting for me to talk to him myself.

She was a fool.

Kiyoka had known about the nightmares tormenting her after all and was waiting for her to confide in him. Watching Miyo take on everything herself without a word to anyone else, despite her insurmountable hardships, made it appear as though she didn't trust anyone, not even him.

If only she had thought about it for a moment, it would have been immediately obvious. But instead, she'd only focused on herself.

Miyo was sure that night on the veranda had been her last golden opportunity. And she'd wasted it.

Kiyoka was kind. Kind enough for Miyo's foolish behavior to make him incredibly concerned.

What am I going to do…?

Would he forgive her if she apologized? At this rate, she had no room to complain if this was the final straw.

Her horrible visions were now reality.

As though he was depriving her of any opportunity to apologize, Kiyoka didn't say a word all morning.

While Miyo knew it was her own fault, his conduct still caused pain to seep into her chest, as though she had returned to her first days at the house. Additionally, she was annoyed with herself for unconsciously expecting that Kiyoka's kindness meant she would be forgiven.

Normally, Yurie would clear the air in these situations, but unfortunately, it was her day off.

After finishing their dour, seemingly endless breakfast together, Miyo began to clean up. It was then that Kiyoka announced, "Get ready to go out."

Rather than feeling relieved at hearing him address her, she was seized by anxiety.

This might really be the end.

Last night wasn't the time to have focused her attention on what Arata had told her.

Her and Kiyoka's relationship could fall apart, and she had none other than herself to blame for destroying everything.

She had strived so hard because she wanted to stay at her fiancé's side. But what if her own foolishness made Kiyoka suffer? What if he told her he didn't need her anymore? Those were all problems far more fundamental than any amount of effort could solve.

For the time being, she followed his instructions, changing her clothes and getting herself together to prepare for their excursion.

Kiyoka also remained silent during their trip. On account of the tense atmosphere, Miyo didn't speak up until they had reached their destination, either.

What is this place…?

It looked like a corporation of some sort. A two-story brick building standing on a plot of land in the imperial city, with a large storeroom attached. Above the double doors at the entrance, sparkling clean glass windows fitted in their frames, was a large sign that read TSURUKI TRADING.

Kiyoka glanced over at Miyo, who was only able to stand there in silence, and urged her inside with a brusque "Let's go."

When they stepped inside, an immaculate and pristine lobby stretched out before them.

Kiyoka headed straight to the young male employee seated at the reception desk.

"What business do you have today, sir?"

"I apologize for coming unannounced. I'd like to meet with one of your employees, Arata Tsuruki."

Miyo gulped when she heard the name leave his lips.

That man couldn't be here, could he? If so, Miyo didn't know how she was supposed to react when she saw him.

"I beg your pardon, but may I ask who is inquiring?"

"Tell him Commander Kudou of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit is here. I don't have an appointment."

"Please wait a moment while I check with him."

The employee went into the room behind him and rushed back out.

"Tsuruki will see you immediately. This way, if you please."

They were taken to the second floor of the building. In stark contrast to the atmosphere on the first floor, where they could sense the presence of industrious laborers at work, the second floor was extremely quiet and still.

Their destination was a room farther down the hall, with a name plate that read Senior Negotiator on the door.

"We've arrived. Please go in."

Giving a nod to the employee's bow, Kiyoka rapped on the door. A "Come in" followed immediately after.

Inside, a dandy young man sitting casually in a chair was waiting.

"Welcome, Commander Kudou. Thank you for your time yesterday."

"…Indeed."

It wasn't good to put the blame on other people. While Miyo was fully aware of this, she still couldn't help glaring at Arata with resentment.

The man shifted his gaze from Kiyoka to Miyo, then grinned.

"It's been but a day since we last met as well, Miss Miyo."

"It has…"

She wanted to press Kiyoka and Arata both about what in the world she was doing there.

"We have a lot to go over. Shall we change locations? I would like to avoid discussing personal matters in the office."

"Sure. I've got a lot I want to ask about, too."

Kiyoka stared at Arata with a sharp gleam in his eyes. Still unsure what exactly was going on, Miyo bit her lip, emotions swirling in her chest.

The three left the office and walked to a residence a few minutes away.

It was a modern, detached wooden house, painted white. The name plate out front read Tsuruki. After they inquired about it, Arata told them he'd been raised here.

"There are people here who want to meet you, Miyo. Oh, and don't worry, nothing bad is going to happen to you here."

While the facade looked modern, many of the rooms inside were lined with familiar tatami flooring; the place was a skillful fusion of Japanese and Western styles. Currently, there didn't seem to be anyone else present, and it was completely quiet save for the barely audible hustle and bustle of the city outside.

Kiyoka and Miyo followed Arata, in complete silence just as before. They were told to wait in a parlor about ten tatami mats in size. He returned a few moments later.

Behind him was an unfamiliar old man, his back straightened and firm.

"Ah, you look just like Sumi…"

"…Sumi?"

The old man had just nostalgically muttered the name of Miyo's mother. Miyo was getting more and more confused. Beside her, Kiyoka stood silent, with his eyes shut. She couldn't get a read on what he was thinking.

"Now, we've got all the players assembled. Everyone's here at last."

Arata smiled. However, even this disarming grin, too, seemed like nothing but a shallow act, and it was only stirring up more anxiety in Miyo.

"Commander Kudou, you've figured it out by now, I assume? Who we are, I mean."

"…I searched high and low, but I never expected this is how I would finally arrive at an answer."

"We don't let anyone find us that easily. We're not allowed to exist publicly. The mere act of meeting with you face-to-face as we are now borders on a violation of our code."

Miyo had lost all hope of making sense of the exchange taking place between Kiyoka and Arata.

Perhaps this meeting is connected to what they discussed yesterday…?

Keeping her questions to herself, she remained quiet and watched the scene playing out before her.

If they were meeting to talk about work, though, why had Kiyoka made sure to bring her along? As she began mulling this over, the truth was plainly thrown out in front of her.

"Now then, allow me to properly introduce ourselves. Welcome, both of you, to the Usuba family home."

"Usu…ba…?"

That was my mother's…

All the thoughts inside Miyo's brain were sent flying.

She couldn't possibly be mistaken. That was the house where her mother, Sumi Saimori, had been born and raised. And now she was in the very same place?

Arata narrowed his eyes and gazed at Miyo as she stood there, speechless.

The first person to break the uncomfortable silence was the elderly man, who'd been quiet up until then.

"That's correct. This is the Usuba home. I'm the previous head of the family, Yoshirou Usuba. I'm your grandfather, Miyo."

“And my true name is actually Arata Usuba. I would be your cousin… Though since Tsuruki is our public-facing identity, that is always how I introduce myself.”

“It can’t be…”

Grandfather. Cousin.

She unconsciously covered her mouth with her hand and looked down.

Miyo had practically never met one of her relatives before.

Her grandparents on the Saimori side had been gone for as long as she could remember. Since her aunts, uncles, and their children didn’t possess the Gift, they lived a modest life far from the capital, and Miyo had never gotten the chance to meet them. And while her stepmother’s parents and siblings often visited the Saimori residence because Kaya was attached to them, they weren’t connected to Miyo by blood, and thus were little more than strangers to her.

As for the Usubas, while she’d known of their existence, she was privy to little else about them.

“Commander Kudou. The reason you’ve come to us today is because you want to stop Miyo’s nightmares, yes?”

“That’s right. Miyo was long told she didn’t have the Gift. But that can’t be the case. That’s why you contacted me in the first place, isn’t it? You intentionally agreed to handle the negotiations for the Burial Grounds situation and appeared before Miyo in order to bring us both here before you.”

Kiyoka took a scrap of paper out of his pocket and showed it to the two men.

Written on it was, presumably, the address for Tsuruki Trading, along with the name *Arata Tsuruki*. The characters for *Usuba* had been scrawled out on the back.

“I found this on the floor of our house. You must’ve sneaked it to Miyo when you visited yesterday. Previously, the name *Sumi Tsuruki* popped up when I hired a private investigator to look into girls’ school students also named *Sumi*. When I had them dig further into the Tsurukis’ history, I found a record from about twenty years back of them receiving funds from the Saimori clan. But you set me up to find this record, didn’t you? To lure us here like this.”

“What makes you say that?”

Kiyoka, indifferent to Arata’s feigned innocence, continued on.

“From all my inquiries, I’ve gathered that the girl named *Sumi* in the Tsuruki family died of natural causes right around the same time as her clan’s decline. Given that the Usubas were in crisis then, it wouldn’t be strange of them to forgo medical treatment for their daughter, which would in turn result in her death going unrecorded. Considering the circumstances, nothing about that would seem remotely suspicious. As a result, my investigation briefly hit a dead end… Until yesterday, when my private investigator abruptly informed me that he’d gotten ahold of new information, to which he produced financial support records. The timing was far too convenient. Tsuruki Trading’s business slump, ‘Sumi Tsuruki’s’ death, the financial assistance from the Saimoris, and ‘Sumi Usuba’ marrying into the Saimori clan… Simply knowing that these series of events happened almost one after the other made it easy to put the pieces together. This scrap of paper was just the coup de grâce.”

“Ha-ha, color me impressed. I’m glad that you were able to find the answer after all. You see, we couldn’t afford to sit back and wait for long. I wasn’t sure if you would find that piece of paper, so honestly, I wondered how many more times I’d have to impose on your place.”

Arata lightly sighed. “You did me a favor, really.”

Kiyoka scowled at him, and the air in the room grew ice cold.

“Please, no need to glare at me so frightfully… It’s exactly as you said: Miyo does indeed have a Gift. On top of that, it’s a valuable one—powerful and exceptionally troublesome.”

The shock hit Miyo so hard that she felt as if she was going to faint.

She had a supernatural ability? No, that couldn’t possibly be true. She lacked Spirit-Sight, and those without it never awakened their special powers. That’s why the Saimoris had always looked down on her. To be told that she had awakened her Gift completely unawares to anyone, even herself—it sounded totally implausible.

But what if maybe, just maybe, she actually had a supernatural ability? If she did, then that meant her life up until then…

Ignoring Miyo’s stupor, Yoshirou exchanged looks with Arata and continued talking in his stead.

“We have only one goal.”

He declared, a sternness coming over his wrinkled visage.

“Kiyoka Kudou. You will hand Miyo over to us.”

Her eyes slowly widened.

Why?

…This must be what people meant by “a bolt from the blue.”

Surprise that was comparable to lightning ripping down from the clear blue sky. And multiple instances of that, in this case.

Circumstances that went against her own conception of herself, yet still very much involved her, had been exposed one after another and just as quickly decided for her. Meanwhile, the shock of the woman whom they were all talking about had gone completely unresolved.

Miyo desperately fought the urge to scream then and there.

“When I heard that, I was furious that he would just decide that for himself.”

This must have been what Hazuki had been feeling when the divorce was forced onto her.

Miyo’s mind had long since gone blank. She couldn’t keep up with this.

Ever since the day before, she had been at the mercy of other people’s words.

First, she’d been brought here without any sort of prior notice, then she’d been told it was her mother’s familial home, and without being provided any clear justification, the conversation continued on under the premise that Miyo indeed possessed supernatural abilities. To top it all off, she’d discovered that she’d been traded away like some commodity.

Miyo didn’t know whether to feel indignant or heartbroken. Unable to even settle her own feelings, she was left in a stupor.

Her fiancé, too, seemed to be perfectly in the loop about everything.

“I figured you’d say that. There’s no doubt that Miyo possesses the Usubas’ unique ability to affect the mental state of others. Be that as it may, however, did you think I’d simply agree to that?”

“I’ll admit, I didn’t take you as the type to readily acquiesce to our demands. Trying to bribe you with money and power would be a waste of time.”

“Then why?”

“The abilities at Miyo’s disposal are very special to us. There will be no compromises.”

Yoshirou’s tone was categorical and decisive.

His will, and the will of the Usuba family itself, was steadfast. They were attempting to make Kiyoka flinch at their absolute, unshaken position.

“She possesses the power of Dream-Sight. Omnipotent power over a person’s slumber. Even stacked up against the special powers of the Usuba clan, it boasts exceptional strength.”

The term *Dream-Sight* didn’t make much sense to Miyo; the word *dream*, however, *was* connected to the nightmares that were plaguing her.

“Dream-Sight is a Gift that has manifested only in a select number of female Gift-users throughout the family’s long history. People with the ability can enter the dreams of any sleeping person, including themselves, and manipulate their visions. Since everyone needs to sleep at some point, the user is capable of manipulating the mind of anyone just by using Dream-Sight, no matter how strong they may be. It’s even possible to brainwash people with the ability. Depending on how capable the user is, they can see all of the past, present, and future in their sleep—in other words, the skill surpasses even the emperor’s own Divine Revelation… If it isn’t the strongest Gift of all, then what is?”

It felt as if Yoshirou was describing the facts of a world far removed from Miyo herself. His explanation itself was like a fantastic dream, lacking all sense of reality.

Omnipotent. The strongest.

She thought it utterly impossible that anything hidden inside her could be described that way.

As far as Miyo was concerned, this was just someone else’s business. That was how she understood it all, whether it was actually true or not.

However, Kiyoka seemed to take the news differently.

“Does a Gift capable of all that truly exist?”

Mumbling in blank surprise, he grew somewhat pale.

“It absolutely does. Thus, we Usubas cannot stand on the public stage. Were we to openly display our power, we would be seen only as a threat. Our abilities would breed conflict and disorder.”

“And you’re saying that’s why you want to keep Miyo under your thumb?”

“Consider it for yourself. Do you think she would be happy as she is now, tormented by nightmares and unable to control her own supernatural powers, with only a man incapable of solving her problems at her side? It is clear she would be best living in this house, where we know of her circumstances and have knowledge of her Gift. Furthermore…”

“……”

“The Usuba family cannot abide the blood of such a Gift being passed on to another clan.”

What conclusion would Kiyoka come to?

I…

Until just a couple days ago, Miyo would have certainly told them right then and there that she had no intention of living with the Usubas. She had absolutely no intention of separating herself from Kiyoka, and she was confident he would let her stay.

But things were different now. If Kiyoka rejected her, she’d have no choice but to resign herself to his decision. She had foolishly trampled over his feelings. If his mind was set on giving her over, the only way she could show her sincerity in return was to obey his wishes.

“…There’s something I’d like to ask.”

“What?”

Deep in his thoughts, Kiyoka seemed to be searching for the right words.

“Why did it take all this time to discover that Miyo had a supernatural ability?”

“Her Gift probably *was* discovered at some point. Sumi must have sealed hers away soon after she was born. I can guess as to what motivated her to deem that necessary.”

Yoshirou explained it like this:

When you looked through records of Gift-users with Dream-Sight, it became readily apparent that there was only one born every few decades. Not once had an individual with the ability passed it on to the subsequent generation. On top of that, their mother also possessed another supernatural power.

“Telepathy.”

A Gift that linked a person’s heart with another’s.

It could be used to express the thoughts in one’s head and feelings in one’s heart without resorting to verbal or bodily avenues of communication.

Though nobody knew why, the mothers of those blessed with Dream-Sight always possessed this supernatural ability, regardless of the strength of their mother’s powers. Sumi had been no exception.

“A Dream-Sight user hadn’t been born for a long time. Gift-user births were declining already, and girls born with Telepathy rarely came along. That’s when the stars aligned and Sumi was born, which excited the whole family.”

Frail yet possessing the power of Telepathy, Sumi was expected to give birth to a Gift-user with Dream-Sight. Though no one had directly revealed this to her, she had lived under intense pressure.

Yoshirou himself apparently married her to a distant relative to try to increase the chances as much as possible that she would give birth to a Gift-user with Dream-Sight.

“But it didn’t work out. Tsuruki Trading’s business waned, our family was living in near starvation, and we could no longer entertain any thoughts of marriage.”

Just before the whole family was about to be forced into the streets, the head of the Saimori family somehow heard of their plight and offered a marriage in exchange for financial support.

“Honestly, at that time I already could see the Saimoris were heading into decline. I never wanted to hand my precious daughter over to a family like them, but… They were persistent and doggedly pursued her.”

A destitute clan, and the Saimoris, adamant that they were only interested in Sumi.

Ultimately, in order to save her family, Sumi overcame Yoshirou’s objections and went to the Saimoris.

Yoshirou grimaced, face twisting with sadness as he recalled that period.

“Considering how hard they pursued Sumi, the former head of their family surely must have known about the power of Dream-Sight. I’m sure that if a child with the ability was born to them, they would exploit her as much as they could; she would’ve had no hope of living a normal, happy life. Sumi probably understood this all too well because she’d faced unreasonable expectations from a young age.”

That was why she’d sealed Miyo’s supernatural powers away and pretended she didn’t have any.

As she listened to her grandfather’s explanation, Miyo was unable to find any of the words she needed to say.

I was always alone.

To a certain extent, she understood her mother's feelings. The dream of her mother she'd had when she first moved into Kiyoka's residence didn't contradict the past Yoshirou spoke of.

But Sumi's actions also caused Miyo's societal value to plummet after she'd passed. Indeed, since Miyo's miserable childhood experiences were a product of her mother's decision, Miyo was finding it difficult to forgive Sumi after all.

If Miyo really did have the Gift, and if her mother hadn't sealed it away, then would the Saimoris have loved her? Couldn't she have built a good relationship with her stepmother and father, without living in Kaya's shadow…? Wouldn't she have been able to be a part of the family?

Though it was far too late to do anything about her past, she couldn't help imagining the happy life she might have been able to lead had things been different.

When she considered the possibilities, it seemed that perhaps she wouldn't have turned out as foolish as she was now. Maybe she would have been a wonderful young lady like Hazuki.

The dark, base emotions that had long been pent-up inside her surged to the surface.

"…In all likelihood, the key to the seal was located within the boundaries of the Saimori estate. But the more time elapsed after the death of the woman who cast the seal, the more it deteriorated. When you factor in Miyo's departure from the Saimori residence on top of that, it eventually disappeared altogether."

"I see. In summary, while you suspected Miyo might have Dream-Sight, her deceased mother's seal tricked you into thinking otherwise, and so consequently, you failed to rescue her from the Saimoris. Is that it?"

“That’s right,” Yoshirou replied with chagrin as Kiyoka mercilessly laid out the Usubas’ mistakes.

“Miyo Saimori did not possess the Gift—no matter how much we looked into this, we always got the same answer. It was truly a great relief to us all. That meant the power of Dream-Sight hadn’t been passed to another line. Given that we are forced to hide ourselves like this to keep on living, we needed to avoid contacting outsiders as members of the Usuba family. We left Miyo in the Saimoris’ care and washed our hands of it all.”

“And now you’re ignoring her own desires and demanding she be handed over to you? Don’t make me laugh!”

“Ah, but Mr. Kudou. Where do you stand in all this?” chimed in Arata, wiping the grin from his face.

A sharp gleam had appeared in his eyes; his innocuous mask had already started to peel away.

“Are you saying you can protect Miyo? Not only was she snatched up before your eyes and injured during the disturbance with the Saimoris, but now she’s continuing to suffer because you can’t stop her unruly powers from giving her nightmares. After all that, can you still say you’re able to protect her?”

“……”

“What do you think, Miyo?”

She wasn’t sure how to answer the abrupt question.

Miyo still wanted to remain at Kiyoka’s side. But if he didn’t want her anymore, then she had no choice but to give up. Because she was the one who’d made him feel that way.

Kiyoka was insisting that he wouldn’t hand her over to the Usubas. How he felt about Miyo, however, was an entirely separate matter.

“…I will yield to whatever my fiancé says.”

“What are you own feelings on the matter?”

If I say that I want to stay by his side, then Kiyoka won’t be able to get rid of me.

Her unwanted opinion would end up hindering him. In that case…

“I…do not care either way.”

Looking Arata straight in the eye, she snuffed out her own emotions in her reply—without noticing Kiyoka gazing in wonder, gasping at her answer.

“In that case—Mr. Kudou. It seems we aren’t going to see eye to eye, so why don’t we have ourselves a fair duel, and the winner will take Miyo with them?” proposed Arata with a refreshing smile.

“Fine by me.”

Miyo couldn’t look at Kiyoka as he impassively accepted Arata’s absurd proposal.

I don’t have any right to ask him why…

She clenched her fists on top of her lap so hard that she almost drew blood.

“Thank you. Now, how about an honest and gentlemanly fight to see who’s stronger. Shall we see for ourselves?”

Arata’s strangely cheerful voice passed through one ear and out the other. Yoshirou didn’t say a word, purposefully not getting involved.

Kiyoka stood up and headed outside, his figure growing smaller and smaller as he went. He was already so far.

“Kiyoka.” Unsure whether she wanted him to turn to face her, or if she wanted to keep him from leaving…Miyo called out his name, tangled feelings in her chest. But he neither turned around nor stopped in his tracks.

But after her plea was ignored, the feeling that rose up within her was not one of despair.

…Foolish, dim-witted, and beyond all help, I—

—might not have been of any value to him anymore.

They entered the garden, which was surprisingly large for a house of this size. Gravel was spread out at their feet, and there were few garden plants. It was a dreary place, as though it had been constructed for dueling.

Next to Miyo, Yoshirou stood with his arms folded, staring hard at the two men.

“Both supernatural abilities and weapons are permitted. We don’t want to burn the house down, though, so no using your most powerful abilities in a wide area.”

“Sounds good.”

Miyo could make out bits and pieces of their conversation from where she stood.

At the moment, Kiyoka wasn’t wearing the saber that he usually carried on him. Just then, however, he pulled out a short sword he’d snuck on his person. Arata was surprised.

“Yeesh, you’re always walking around with that dangerous thing?”

“…For self-defense.”

“That’s a relief. Looks like I won’t need to hold back.”

Arata produced a revolver.

Even an amateur like Miyo could tell which one of them was at a disadvantage.

Kiyoka drew his sword and held it at the ready. Loosely holding his gun, Arata didn't seem at all perturbed, beaming with his usual smile.

"I'm happy that I have the opportunity to go up against the renowned Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit commander, even if we have to keep ourselves in check. Come at me however you'd like, Commander Kudou."

"I'll take you up on that."

Unreservedly accepting the invitation, Kiyoka kicked off the ground, then sent out a blinding-fast slash of his blade. Arata lightly evaded the blow, not showing a hint of distress.

The fierce exchanges that followed their initial clash were totally incomprehensible to Miyo.

Kiyoka seemed to be pushing his opponent back with a continuous volley of slashes, but Arata evaded them all. In fact, for some reason, it was as if Kiyoka's sword slices hadn't once reached the man at all.

……Huh?

All of sudden, there were two more Aratas.

The pair, clearly duplicates of Arata, moved independently.

The next instant, it happened—there was a loud bang, and Kiyoka's upper right arm burst open. Blood splattered on the ground.

"Eek……!"

Miyo's mind went totally blank.

Kiyoka…Kiyoka, he's…

He had been shot. He'd been shot, and blood was pouring out of him.

The color drained from her face as her head spun. After all, whose fault was all this? Who was to blame for things ending up this way?

It's me… I did it all…

Still in a daze, she unconsciously tried to run over to her fiancé, but Yoshirou grabbed her arm and stopped her.

She could hear Arata's voice.

"Oops, I must've missed my mark. I was aiming for your sword hilt."

"……"

Trying to capitalize on Kiyoka's momentary opening after being wounded, Arata fired another round. However, some sort of barrier blocked his next attack.

"Dammit."

"How's that? It seems you can't trust your own eyes anymore."

The two of them were conversing like normal, but Miyo couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Before she knew it, tears filled with nothing but regret and terror overflowed, blurring her vision.

I'm sorry, Kiyoka…

Her fiancé still had his short sword raised. A supernatural electric current had enveloped the blade.

"An electric Gift, hmm? If it's come to that…"

Facing the bellicose, beaming Arata, Kiyoka closed in and slashed down his lightning-infused sword.

It cut clean through Arata's figure, another clone-like illusion. Though the doppelgänger had dispersed, an electric discharge from Kiyoka's blade erupted around the real Arata that same moment, sending many pillars of light rushing through the sky.

"*Yeow*, that stings!"

One of the beams just barely grazed Arata. Even Miyo witnessed the crackling spark of electricity rip into him.

Though the attack didn't hit the man head-on, it had clearly injured him. Kiyoka's opponent winced as a red burn mark appeared on his arm.

Light crackled across the surface of Kiyoka's blade.

"Sheesh, there's never been anyone who's dealt with my illusions so fast before."

Arata grumbled, tears in his eyes.

"…You must be slacking, then. There's a bunch of men in my unit who can manage illusions like this."

"It would appear so."

"Giving up?"

"Heavens, no. I'll hold out a bit longer."

Lightly wiping the sweat on his forehead, Kiyoka again readied his short sword.

"Hyah!"

The instant he shouted, several phantom Aratas appeared. There were many more this time, numbering more than twenty in total.

Even from far away, the uncanny sight of so many shared visages, each with the exact same smirk, was enough to make Miyo nauseous.

"Now then, which one's the real me, I wonder."

"Enough of the petty tricks!"

As though a dragon himself, Kiyoka summoned a coiling vortex of flame and launched it at the ensemble of shared faces. Yet it only resulted in the phantoms slowly disappearing, one by one.

Suddenly, one of the Aratas circled around behind Kiyoka. Catching the attack, Kiyoka summoned a fireball with his supernatural abilities and prepared to immediately throw it behind him, when—

……What?

Arata had turned into Miyo.

Her pounding, throbbing headache intensified. Utterly bewildered, Miyo could no longer make sense of what was going on.

There was no mistake—facing off against Kiyoka was none other than Miyo herself. A mirror image. Everything was exactly the same, from her face and body, to the refreshingly light blue kimono she wore.

Another…illusion?

—Bang!

A third gunshot.

The bullet caught the hilt of Kiyoka's sword with precision, sending it flying from his hands. The weapon landed outside of Kiyoka's reach, and the man himself groaned from the shock and pain in his hands.

Please, stop.

Miyo was the one at fault. That was why…

A lukewarm sensation endlessly streamed down her cheeks.

"I win."

Arata fixed his gun barrel straight at her fiancé's head.

No, you can't, not Kiyoka…

Don't shoot him. Don't kill him.

"I'm surprised. I didn't think such a cheap trick would work on you."

Kiyoka averted his eyes from Arata's slightly scornful gaze. Blood continued to flow unendingly from his wounded right arm.

"Well, though, really, there's nothing to be embarrassed about losing to me. It was always going to end this way. An Usuba should never lose a fight against another Gift-user. A predictable outcome."

"……"

"You're strong. But protecting Miyo is my duty."

Drooping his head, Kiyoka twisted his face to hold back his tears.

The agony, the bitter pain, the anxiety. Miyo had reached her limit.

"Kiyoka!"

Shaking her arm free from Yoshirou's grip, Miyo rushed to his side. Miyo found herself reaching out once again toward his bloodstained and outstretched hand—

—and she failed to reach it. She stumbled as Arata pulled her by the shoulder.

"Please don't make that face, Miyo. We had an agreement, so you'll be under the protection of the Usuba family… Commander, you can leave now. Also, your work at the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit is likely going to get even busier from here on out. Best of luck."

Miyo's tears wouldn't stop. All of it, everything, had been her fault. She couldn't forgive herself for not trusting in her fiancé, for causing him so many injuries.

Kiyoka's figure began to blur; she assumed it was from the tears in her eyes.

"Miyo……!"

She thought she heard him call her name, but suddenly, everything was sucked up into distorting air in front of her and vanished.

After being repelled from inside the Usuba house's barrier and forcefully ejected, Kiyoka returned home in a complete daze, sitting idle until dawn broke.

Did an empty house always feel this cold?

The scene of his defeat replayed again and again in the back of his mind. He ruminated about how things would have been different if only he'd done this or that before realizing that it was futile.

Still, he thought his main assertion had been correct. The Usuba pair's declaration was selfish; ultimately, they were only after Miyo's Gift, just like the Saimoris. They claimed they were protecting her while prioritizing their own feelings above hers.

That was why Kiyoka couldn't afford to lose.

He surrendered his body to his regret, enough to vomit up his empty, foodless stomach. When he quietly closed his eyes, Miyo's crying visage was there waiting for him.

After a while, he heard a shriek from Hazuki, who'd arrived for Miyo's lessons.

"Kiyoka?! Why, just look at you! What happened?!"

When his wide-eyed sister demanded answers, Kiyoka gloomily recounted the circumstances to her. He did this without adding any of his own feelings—just the facts.

When he'd finished the explanation, a forceful slap flew across his face.

Hazuki pinched her brow inward as she trembled with rage.

"And once you lost, you slunk back here with your tail between your legs? Unbelievable!"

"……"

“Don’t you have something to say for yourself? You’re so pathetic, it makes your sister here want to cry.”

Hazuki roughly rolled up Kiyoka’s shirtsleeve, glaring at the wound on his upper arm.

The blood was already dried, but the untreated injury was red and hot to the touch.

“Look at this thing; it’s just awful. Don’t you have a reputation for being tough?”

“……Hgh!”

She grabbed the area around the wound, and pain shot through him. Though the injury itself was shallow, the mixture of burned skin, scratches, and lacerations had turned into a mess.

Hazuki held her hands on the lesion and closed her eyes.

When she did, a powdery substance of dim light floated down from the palms of her hands, and it smoothly melted into the wound. It healed in the blink of an eye.

Hazuki possessed the Gift of supernatural healing.

Though her ability had the power to treat any sort of injury instantly, it had no effect on poison or disease. This skill was less a product of the Kudou family and more an inheritance from Kiyoka and Hazuki’s mother.

“……Sorry.”

“That’s not it, my stupid little brother. Who told you to apologize? Hurry up and bring Miyo back here right his instant.”

Hazuki smacked his freshly healed limb, the look of a fiend in her eyes. “What else did I fix you up for?”

“I couldn’t possibly try to go back for her.”

“Why not?”

“…I lost the duel. I don’t have any right to bring her home.”

It had been a fair and square bout. Complaints and protests after the fact about the result were out of the question.

More than anything else, though, Kiyoka didn’t have the courage to face Miyo.

Miyo’s refusal to choose him had carved a deeper wound in Kiyoka’s heart than he had initially thought. Despite the fact that he was the one who had laid into her and hounded her in the kitchen for answers.

Hazuki brought a fist down on his limply drooping head.

“Ow…!”

“You idiot. Here’s the thing: I don’t care what a useless little man like you feels, okay? But if things stay this way, it’s poor Miyo who I’ll be worried about.”

“…Miyo said it herself. It didn’t matter to her whether she was here or at the Usubas’.”

“Idiot!”

Her fist came down again. He assumed there wasn’t much strength behind the blow, but his head still tingled with pain.

“Stop and think for a moment. Do you really believe Miyo would say something like that if she was mad at you for scolding her? Or better yet, would she even be angry in the first place?”

“But…”

“She would obviously blame everything on herself, wouldn’t she? Miyo would think it was her fault for not being able to pick up on your feelings.”

Kiyoka could easily picture Miyo crying over the situation and burdening herself with far more guilt than necessary.

“That girl has no confidence in herself. Don’t you know that? She thinks that no matter how much she may want to be by your side, it’s all over if you turn away from her. That’s why she wanted to improve herself—so she could become someone you needed.”

“……”

“I mean, really, of course she couldn’t confide in you. And forget talking to me or Yurie—that’s totally out of the question. She’s never had anyone she could rely on in her life until now.”

Kiyoka had nothing he could say to Hazuki. All of it was spot on.

Only after coming to his residence had Miyo learned to express her own emotions and let people care for her. Before then, everyone had ignored her, and she hadn’t been able to believe in herself. She’d never even had the option to rely on someone else in the first place.

The only thing Kiyoka could do was devotedly care for his fiancée and keep warming up her heart. He should have grasped something so simple.

“So it really is my fault…”

“There’s no time to mope around. Save the pity party for later! We need to hurry to Miyo and—”

Hazuki suddenly cut off.

She’d sensed a presence slip inside the barrier around the house. Naturally, Kiyoka had caught wind of it, too.

Fluttering in from the window was a single sheet of paper, shaped like a person. The insignia stamped into its body belonged to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit. It looked like the familiars Godou would send out.

The paper being writhed its body and vibrated. When it did, Godou's voice echoed through the room, not in his usual flippant tone, but as though he had his back up against the wall.

"Commander, come to the station as soon as you hear this! It's an emergency!"

The one-way communication ended there.

Apparently, there hadn't been time to have a proper conversation. It must have been an emergency if he of all people was in a rush.

Of all the times.

This just had to happen as soon as he got the urge to drop everything and rescue Miyo.

Which should he prioritize? He couldn't help but chuckle bitterly at how quickly he came to an answer without a moment's thought.

"I really might be coldhearted after all."

Heartless and cold-blooded. The decision he was making couldn't be described any other way.

If he let this chance go by, he'd lose Miyo forever. If he didn't go to her now, he was sure she'd be completely taken from him by the Usuba family. Nevertheless…

"Keep your boneheaded comments to yourself. If you're going to go to work, then hurry up and hurry back."

"……Sis."

"What? I'm on *Miyo's* side, you know. Don't expect any warm words of encouragement from me."

After she finished her remark with a haughty puff, Kiyoka sighed at his sister and took off his dirty shirt in his own room.

Passing his arms through the familiar sleeves of his uniform, he switched his thoughts over to his work.

He hadn't given up on Miyo. Nor was he choosing his work over her.

He simply got the feeling that if he abandoned his duty here, he truly would lose everything and anything.

"Be careful. If you get hurt, I can heal any of your wounds, but Miyo would be broken up if anything happened to you."

"I know."

"Honestly, I swear you're the least charming little brother in the entire world!"

Huffing in dissatisfaction the whole way, Hazuki went to the entryway to see Kiyoka off.

She was right. It wasn't set in stone that he wouldn't make it back in time.

Kiyoka would clean up the whole mess and bring Miyo back home without any fear or hesitation.

He hadn't understood how much peace of mind it gave him to have her waiting for him here. It wasn't a home for him without her.

"I will take her back. No matter what."

Take back everything.

While the average person would surely describe everyday life in the Usuba household as pleasant, Miyo did not.

They gave her a Western-style room on the second floor. Complementing the high-quality navy-blue carpet were white walls, painted with a touch of yellow so as not to be too bright. Almost all

the furniture was wooden, but their detailed designs made them look like Western-style pieces. A spotlessly polished glass lamp illuminated the interior, imbuing the room with a relaxed atmosphere.

In contrast to the first floor, which mainly consisted of chambers with tatami flooring, the second floor was styled after Western homes. Miyo wasn't used to sleeping on a raised bed and sitting in chairs,

When she asked if there was anything she could do in the house to make herself useful, the Usubas informed her there was nothing. In fact, they went so far as to tell her, "You don't need to do anything." The chores were skillfully handled by one or two servants, so there was no chance for Miyo to get involved.

Her daily life of inactivity was gloomy and depressing.

She would wake up in the morning, change her clothes, and take her meals alone in her room. The servants brought almost exclusively Western-style dishes.

Breakfast was bread and side dishes—smoked meats, scrambled eggs, cheese, and the like—along with vegetable soup and some fresh fruit. For lunch and dinner, they'd serve Western-style porridge, made from milk, plus some type of meat, which was either seared or boiled. Despite the smells and textures making it clear that everything must have been delicious, she didn't really taste any of it and had a hard time keeping it down.

Miyo would mechanically finish her meal, vacant and absentminded. After going through the same motions a few times, her day would draw to a close.

Strangely, she hadn't had any nightmares since coming to the house. Now, even sleep simply passed her by, completely dissolved in the flow of time.

“You seem down, Miyo.”

Arata had stopped addressing her as *miss* at some point.

While Miyo didn’t harbor any particular reservations toward her sole conversation partner during these days of vacant boredom, she did get the feeling that something was off.

Arata—who was currently sitting on the other side of the table between them—always had a smile on his face, and he was quite handsome. She was sure most women would find him irresistible. That made the fact that he would always stay by Miyo’s side and observe her all the more confusing.

Was it because she had Dream-Sight, which held great value to the Usubas?

If that was indeed the case, then what a cold and impersonal relationship it was.

“Are you still upset? At me, I mean.”

Miyo shook her head.

Putting the blame on Arata wouldn’t do anything. His actions had been nothing more than a trigger; her relationship would have broken down sooner or later. All because Miyo didn’t understand a thing.

“If that’s not it, then…maybe your room isn’t to your liking?”

“……No, it’s fine.”

“Then, do you dislike the food?”

“That’s not it.”

“Ah, I see. Then it must be that your clothes aren’t to your taste. Is that it?”

“Um, about my kimono…”

“I can’t give that back to you.”

Arata gracefully brought the cup of black tea to his mouth. While his attitude was outwardly friendly, his reply left no room for argument.

After he had defeated Kiyoka and expelled him from the house, Miyo had been welcomed into the Usuba home.

She didn’t remember what happened after that; once she saw Kiyoka’s injuries, she hadn’t been able to stop bawling out of worry for him. By the time she’d recovered, she was in her room, staring off into space. She’d been provided a *hakama*-type of kimono, the kind a shrine maiden would wear, to change into. The kimono she’d been wearing that day had been taken, and they still had yet to return it to her.

When she asked why she’d been given shrine maiden attire, they told her it was because Gift-users with Dream-Sight used to be called Dream-Sight Mediums. As a holdover from those days, it was customary for those with Dream-Sight to wear the same style of outfit as their forebears.

“Of course, if the user herself refuses, we don’t force it on them. I simply didn’t know what sort of clothes you preferred.”

Arata had looked so apologetic as he said it, and she didn’t have any desire to complain, simply because as long as she wasn’t able to wear the kimono Kiyoka had bought for her, it made no difference what she was dressed in.

“I’m at a loss. What can I do to make you happy?”

“……”

Miyo stared at the wood grain of the table in silence.

It wasn’t a matter of being happy or unhappy.

Since witnessing Kiyoka get injured in the duel, she had been filled with nothing but regret. She was remorseful that she'd lied about her own feelings rather than deciding things for herself.

Now that she thought about it, Kiyoka had always accepted her.

Several months back, when she'd arrived on his doorstep as a prospective marriage partner, he'd let her into his home. He showed her the wide-open world. Gave her so many things. He came to her rescue when she was carried off to the Saimori estate. He'd even fought and injured himself for her.

After all of that, why hadn't she believed in him?

I really am a complete and hopeless fool, aren't I?

Though the truth had finally dawned on her, she knew it was too late now. But…

"…Just one more time. I want to talk to Kiyoka one more time."

"Why?"

"Because I was wrong about absolutely everything. That's why. I want to apologize, and then—"

"Then what? You'll say you want to leave here?"

A coldhearted glimmer flashed in Arata's eye.

Miyo gulped down the rest of her words.

"I won't let you. Do you know how much we've, or rather, how much *I've*, waited for you? How fortunate I feel right now? You don't. Not one bit."

"Um, I don't understand… Why do you feel so strongly?"

"I want to protect you. Together, I want to fulfill our familial obligation—the duty of the Usuba clan."

"The duty of the Usubas?"

His words and his look, serene yet filled with intense passion, moved her. They were a testament to the strength of his convictions.

“Did you know that the supernatural abilities of the Usuba clan all have something in common? They influence the minds of others.”

“…No, I didn’t.”

“Without exception, all of the Gift-users in the Usuba family possess powers that can affect people’s minds in some way. Your Dream-Sight is one example, as is my ability to control illusions. Others include taking over someone’s consciousness or manipulating memories… There are quite a few variations. This unique trait only manifests in the Gift-users of our family.”

“I get what you’re saying, I think.”

It was hard to believe, but Gifts turned what was normally impossible into reality. After her abnormal experience of nightly terrors, and seeing Kiyoka being led around by phantoms, she had no choice but to believe it.

“Now, can you guess why these powers are restricted to the Usuba line?”

“…Not at all.”

Unfortunately, with Miyo’s poor cognition and lack of knowledge on Gifts, she hadn’t the faintest idea.

Arata smiled ironically, shaking his head slightly.

“Normal Gifts are for defeating Grotesqueries. While they are sometimes utilized during war, they’re tuned for the elimination of fiends, spirits, and the like—all the beings that harm people. Conversely, the Gifts of the Usuba family target humans. They are supernatural abilities made for taking on people, not Grotesqueries. And they work on both average people and Gift-users alike.”

Most Gift-users were tasked with exterminating the Grotesqueries that harmed people. Since Gifts were the only thing that could effectively defeat those beings, they were an absolute necessity.

In which case, what exactly was the Usuba family tasked with?

What use was there for people who could easily manipulate others as they saw fit?

“Do they use their Gifts to do something with people instead?”

“You’re close. Not with any person, but with Gift-users specifically.”

Using supernatural abilities on Gift-users. Miyo couldn’t immediately see what he was getting at.

“Our duty is to stop other Gift-users when required. We serve as deterrents against people with supernatural abilities, who could otherwise wield their tremendous power to bring ruin to us all.”

“A deterrent……?”

“That’s right. In short, the supernatural abilities of our line are for defeating other Gift-users.”

Miyo finally connected the dots.

Arata continued.

“For instance, say a Gift-user who possessed a fire-based power decided they wanted to burn down a town somewhere. Sensing their intentions, a water-based Gift-user is sent in to stop them. But what if that fire Gift-user is stronger than the water Gift-user? They’d be forced to watch in silence as the town burned to the ground, unable to snuff out their opponent’s flames. Therefore, the need arises for a dedicated force that specializes in stopping out-of-control Gift-users.”

“Specialists who stop other Gift-users…”

“It all makes sense, doesn’t it? You don’t appear to have Spirit-Sight, Miyo. But here in the Usuba family, it’s quite normal for Gift-users to be without it.”

Suddenly, she stared directly at Arata.

“Is that because Usuba Gift-users don’t need to see Grotesqueries…?”

“That’s basically it. However, even though we serve as deterrents, we’re so powerful that eventually someone who can keep us in check would need to come along, and so on and so forth, without end. That’s why there’s a strict code placed on the Usuba family. This code has been kept firmly in place since the beginning, and the punishment for those who break it is extremely severe.”

Living in secrecy; hiding their names. These inconvenient and self-imposed restrictions proved that the Usubas had no intent to rebel. To show complete obedience to the emperor, they obscured their existence to the public.

That being said, the loyalty of other Gift-users besides the Usubas to their country and emperor was generally very strong. If it wasn’t for the emperor’s protection, it was very likely the Gift-users would be turned from heroes who protected the country into heretics. These apprehensions would only grow stronger in the current era, where advances in science had begun to make people question both Grotesqueries and Gift-users.

Therefore, there had been a remarkable decrease in moments where the Usubas were ordered to carry out their duty.

“We’ve faithfully protected the vow made by our ancestors… We mustn’t use our real names. We can’t use our Gifts outside. We’re only allowed to marry among our relatives. We can’t make any particularly close friends or lovers. We can’t buy anything expensive without permission. We’re also prohibited from drinking alcohol

outside of the house. This is just a small taste of our code of conduct; there are many, many more rules to follow."

"Goodness…"

"Indeed. But ever since I came of age, I have never once been ordered to work as a member of the Usuba family. In almost all cases, the Special Anti-Grotesqueries Unit or powerful families like the Kudous end up resolving the situation. It's never our turn to make an appearance. No matter how modestly we live, how devoted we are to our code, it's meaningless in the end."

"……"

"I want a role. A duty for me and me alone."

As she heard her cousin lower his voice, as though enduring something painful, Miyo realized he must have been forced to swallow a number of harsh realities during his life up until now.

He'd been able to perform well against Kiyoka thanks to his strict training and continuous hard work. But how frustrating would it be to never make use of all that effort, have it never be called upon, despite imposing so many inconveniences on oneself?

Miyo could only imagine. Nevertheless, she could grasp that he had lived a life filled with irritation and impatience.

"Within the Usuba family codes, it says that if a user of Dream-Sight should appear, she should be protected and supported by the entire family. As a matter of fact, for generations, a chosen Gift-user with the family bears the role of providing them with constant care and giving their life to protect them."

"Hng!"

"Right now, that job will likely fall to me… While also acting as your spouse, I imagine."

Miyo stiffened from the unexpected shock.

Arata as her spouse. She'd never considered the possibility.

The anguish felt as if something was caught in her chest.

But it's obvious, really…

As long as she was recognized as a Gift-user, she no longer had the option to remain unwed. If Kiyoka stopped being her fiancé, then some other would come forward. It was practically a given.

"Even within the Usuba family, there's been a significant drop in Gift-users. Widen the net to include our distant relatives, and there are still only a scattered few. My own father was Giftless, and I've only ever lived here with Grandfather from a young age in order to learn how to use my Gift. I believe Grandfather is planning on making us get married."

"…I see."

"The reason you suffered those nightmares is because your supernatural abilities were running out of control. But as long as you're in this house, a special magic barrier will keep them at bay. Please, Miyo. Stay here like this. I'll gladly protect you. It's my mission and mine alone. I don't want to give you away, no matter what. I don't mind if your heart remains out of reach. Let me support you. Let me protect you. Please."

"Protect and support me…"

When she faced his honest and clear eyes, which glowed with passion, Miyo's heart wavered.

Was there really nothing more she could do?

She wanted to see Kiyoka one more time. See him, apologize, and beg him for an opportunity to do things over again. To tell him she had been a fool.

But she couldn't. Because she had been stupid enough to say, "I don't care either way," Kiyoka likely thought her feelings were

noncommittal. If she begged him for a second chance at this point, he'd still doubt her, and that would be it.

It really and truly serves me right.

Miyo ridiculed herself in her heart.

Trying to cool his impassioned head, Arata departed from Miyo's room.

Why? Why did I get like that…?

He wanted a role. There was no questioning these were his truest feelings.

It was something he'd always longed for. To fulfill his duty as an Usuba Gift-user. If his job fighting against other Gift-users was deemed unnecessary, then at the very least, he'd hoped that a girl with the power of Dream-Sight would appear.

Otherwise, Arata couldn't discover his own raison d'être. Without it, he felt as if he would never become a proper man of society.

But he had never disclosed these closely guarded sentiments to anyone before. Though his grandfather had likely picked up on them, Arata had never made a point of revealing them himself.

Guess I'm more ecstatic than I thought.

He clenched his fists tightly.

The Usubas' fervent desire was at last realized—the appearance of a woman with the power of Dream-Sight… And with it came another duty for Arata to hold—protecting her.

He raced down the hall and descended to the first floor.

It was miserably empty inside this stately home. Lacking in both people and belongings. The exterior was decent, but take one step inside, and it was obvious the place was empty.

Arata was still young when he'd first arrived, and he didn't even remember when the house had started to decline. He knew that there used to be more people, with plenty of furniture and belongings… But both slowly began to disappear as time went on, with the final nail in the coffin coming twenty years ago.

When he'd learned of the role thrust upon him, Arata mused it was as though the house was a reflection of himself.

The facade might be well kept, but there's nothing on the inside. No worth at all, either.

Though outwardly, he was an upstanding member of the Tsuruki family and their trading firm, his inner self, the one that belonged to the Usuba clan, was entirely hollow. While his status as an Usuba Gift-user was well established, the truth was that he'd never been given a single job to handle. He was simply an empty vessel.

Not wanting people to perceive this lack, Arata kept up his external self to the best of his abilities.

A personality, first impression, and appearance crafted to endear himself to others. All of it was simply a veiled bluff. An illusion to give him a piddling, meager sense of pride that he had something, *anything*, that people needed him for.

And yet, the more magnificent his exterior persona became, the more the emptiness inside him grew.

If I could only fill that hollowness inside me, then…

He'd end up clinging to it no matter what.

When he first saw his cousin, Miyo Saimori, his initial impression of her was that she was dour and gloomy. At the time, he honestly thought it was some sort of cruel prank.

His expectations made him terribly disillusioned. Tyrannized by her blood relatives to the point where she'd lost her sense of self, Miyo was just as empty as Arata and the vacant house he'd grown up in. That was why he thought the dull, somber girl would fit right in… It was a sensation comparable to utter despair.

Yet back then.

"Stop, please!"

It had been a shock.

She'd openly opposed Arata to his face as he criticized every member of the Kudou family.

Despite how gaunt and emaciated she was, she'd still made her voice heard.

Do I have anything that I would become so desperate to protect?

The moment he thought it over, he quickly and easily arrived at *no*. A hollow person like him couldn't possibly have anything he wanted or needed to safeguard.

But what about Miyo, then?

According to his investigation, she should also have been as empty as he was since she'd grown up without anyone to validate her—a lonely girl who had endured her family disavowing her very existence.

However, she was empty no more. Arata's notion that they were similar had been a gross misunderstanding.

That realization produced a twinge of jealousy deep down inside him.

I want it. I want it so very badly… The desire to keep hold of her is blazing inside me.

The thing that would fulfill him. A duty, and the person who would let him fulfill it.

Now he was a bit thankful this person ended up being Miyo. Being free from her emptiness, he could imagine a future where he felt fulfilled, instead of them both licking each other's emotional wounds.

Calming his heart and quickly devolving into giddiness, Arata headed to his office, leaving the empty house behind him.

"Can we talk?" asked her grandfather, Yoshirou, poking his head into her room.

It was Miyo's fourth day since coming to the house.

The monotonous days of idleness, where she'd done nothing save for eating, sleeping, and conversing with Arata, were beginning to hollow her out inside. Time passed indistinctly. At some moments, it slowed to a crawl, while at others, it passed in the blink of an eye.

Coming to her senses at Yoshirou's voice, Miyo was surprised to find it was almost noon. It felt as if it had been mere minutes since she had eaten her breakfast.

When Miyo nodded silently, Yoshirou gave a polite "Pardon me" and sat down in Arata's usual chair across from her.

"Sorry for not coming sooner. I shouldn't have waited so long to talk with you."

"……No need to apologize."

When she first came here, Yoshirou had struck her as very stern and strict, but now he looked like any other old man. No intimidating aura or anything of the sort. To some extent, his apologetic manner even made him come off as helpless.

“Have you been inconvenienced at all since coming here?”

“Not particularly.”

“I see. Tell Arata if you ever are. That boy would be willing to dedicate his everything to his duty—to you.”

“It doesn’t make me very happy to hear that…”

Nothing made her more uncomfortable than having a fine, upstanding man like him serving her. Having been on the serving side of the relationship up until now, if anything, felt like a burden.

Dropping her eyes down and staring at her hands in her lap, Miyo nodded along to Yoshirou’s words.

“There’s not much I can tell you about. I imagine that Arata’s gone over most of the things you need to know. If there’s anything I can tell you, I suppose it would be about Sumi.”

“Mother,” Miyo whispered under her breath.

She was naturally interested in hearing about her own mother. However, ever since Miyo had learned Sumi was responsible for sealing her Gift, she’d been mired in mixed feelings.

“Instead of my mother, there’s something else I’d like to ask you about.”

“What’s that?”

“Um, I would like to see Kiyoka again… Would it be possible to grant my request?”

Even if this proved futile, it was better to ask than stay silent. After she'd broached the subject, Yoshirou groaned as a stern look came over his face, just as she'd expected.

Because their public name was Tsuruki, it was said that Arata's father acted as the head of the Usuba family, but the one actually managing the family was Yoshirou. Namely, he would ultimately decide how Miyo was treated. This obviously meant he was always going to be the one to decide if she would be allowed to see Kiyoka.

Though her expectations weren't high to begin with, as Miyo sensed his answer, her spirits sank.

"I myself feel it would be fine to grant your wish, but the thing is, our hands are tied in certain respects. As things stand now, you can't. You probably wouldn't be able to meet up with him even if you left to see him."

"Huh? What does that mean…?"

"I know the Special Anti-Grotesqueries Unit's been stuck with a real burden of a mission thanks to a Divine Revelation from the emperor. They're right in the thick of it at the moment."

She recalled that Arata had faced Kiyoka and told him that things would be getting busier. This must have been what he'd meant.

So Kiyoka was still busy, then. He'd be fine since Yurie was still around, but Miyo was frustrated that she couldn't be by his side to support him in his time of need, regardless of whether her help was strictly necessary.

"You want to see that youngster enough to cry about it, hmm?"

She touched her cheeks in surprise and found them wet with warm teardrops.

"Th-this, no, it's not that…"

"What is it, then?"

"…I just thought about how I'm always so powerless, and I felt so pitiful…"

With only a brief, "I see," Yoshirou nodded.

Her true feelings seeped out of her alongside her bulbous tears.

"I'm never strong enough when it's most important. When the time comes, I never have what it takes…"

Neither a Gift nor the skills of a noblewoman. If she'd been equipped with those abilities, she would have reached out a hand to help, even if her talents had proved to be lacking. But as things stood now, by the time she could do any of that, it would be too late. What point was there in acquiring new skills after the time to use them had already passed?

A Gift—it was the only thing she'd ever wanted from a young age. Though Miyo had recently discovered that she possessed one, it didn't make her the least bit happy. Kiyoka had told her she didn't need any supernatural abilities. Beyond that, Miyo had no opportunity to use them, either. Even the Usuba family didn't depend on her powers. Her ostensibly precious supernatural talent was actually an albatross around her neck.

"Hmm, you're a bit similar to Arata, then."

"Huh?"

"You don't know what to do with yourself. Your environment and your abilities are at odds with each other. Though ultimately it is us, the people in your life, who are responsible for that."

"But, um—"

"I've put you through terrible hardships. If only I had looked into how you were being treated by the Saimoris sooner, you wouldn't have had to endure that torment."

Yoshirou bowed deeply.

Miyo was flustered, unsure what to do in the face of the unexpected apology.

When his next words came out, however, she naturally froze into place.

“I figure you won’t warm up quickly to life here since it’s such a sudden change for you. But know that, at the heart of it, we’re blood relations. I hope you won’t hesitate to rely on us from now on.”

He wanted her to rely on them. Because they were family.

She remembered Hazuki saying the same thing to her. Kiyoka, too, had urged her to let him take care of things for her, to be more selfish.

She cast her eyes down as a dark haze slowly descended over her thoughts.

“…Telling me we’re family out of the blue only makes things harder for me.”

“I know. I figured it might.”

“When I saw what my father, stepmother, and stepsister had, it was what I always wanted. I hoped that maybe someone I could spend my life with like that would come for me someday.”

“……”

“But they never did. Before long, I gave up…and at this point, you can tell me we’re family and ask me to rely on you, but I simply don’t know what that entails.”

Miyo knew a part of her had grown desperate and no longer cared what would happen to her, which must have been why she’d been able to bare the feelings she kept hidden from Hazuki and Kiyoka to someone like Yoshirou. She wanted to spew out all these thoughts that were too much for her to handle.

“A long time ago, there was a servant who acted as a replacement for my mother, but I’m sure that was different from ‘family.’ Maybe I would understand if I married and became a mother. What exactly is ‘family’?”

“……”

“Everyone must be so fed up with my inability to get something as basic as that. That’s why Kiyoka got mad at me, too.”

“Is that so?”

“Um, my apologies. I didn’t mean to make you listen to my nonsense.”

She was venting all her thoughts at once, which wasn’t fair to the person listening. Miyo felt so ashamed, she couldn’t stand it.

Yet when she glanced up toward Yoshirou, he smiled gently.

“No, it’s fine. I’m glad I got to hear your true feelings.”

“What……?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to speak as your grandfather for a moment.”

“……Okay.”

“Wouldn’t you say being able to share the things we can’t endure on our own, like we’re doing now, is what family’s all about?”

Sharing together…?

She cocked her head, unable to fully grasp his point.

“At this point, you can’t choke down your emotions anymore. That’s why you openly let them all out, right?”

“Y-yes, that’s true……”

“That’s basically what I mean. Depending on others doesn’t mean you throwing all your problems on their shoulders. I think that it’s

shifting some of the baggage that's too heavy to bear on to others. That way you can both appreciate the difficulty of the load, and once you're finished carrying it, you can share in the joy of overcoming it together. Being able to do that without any restraint or hesitation, that's family, isn't it? Making them exasperated, making them angry, it's all okay. The bonds of family aren't so easily broken."

"…Even when my mother left this house?"

Her mother, with all the expectations of her family placed on her shoulders. Miyo knew that the entire Usuba family must have been very upset with her when she practically forced them to let her marry into the Saimoris.

Yoshirou grabbed his chin, thinking it over for a moment.

"You're right; I did lose myself to anger at the time. Seeing the daughter I'd worked so hard to raise be snatched up by the Saimoris made my blood boil. I swore I'd never forgive her for being so ungrateful."

"Did you end up resenting her…?"

"I didn't. I thought I'd never forgive her, but Sumi was too precious to me. Now, of course, there are some parents who disown their children and sever all ties completely. But if my daughter was hurt and suffering, I would want to be there to help, and if I knew for sure she was living happily, that would bring me joy, too."

Oh, so that must be it, Miyo thought, convinced by his words.

Up until now, there hadn't been anyone in Miyo's life with whom she could share her feelings, who could consider things from her point of view. She was always grappling with her emotions by herself.

Kiyoka had said the same thing. That he considered Hazuki someone who could understand what he was thinking and vice versa.

“Miyo, I feel the same way about you.”

“About me…?”

“That’s right. After Sumi left to be married, our family survived, and you were born. I’m truly happy that I was able to meet you like this.”

“……!”

When she picked up on the twinkle in the corner of Yoshirou’s eyes, she understood his words had truly come from the heart.

Her Dream-Sight powers being so precious and valuable were definitely part of it. But more than that, the Usubas had wanted to make Miyo a part of the family from the very beginning. They’d longed to meet her from the bottom of their hearts.

“Thank…you.”

“There’s no need. We’re the ones who should be grateful, Miyo. I’m glad I was able to talk with you.”

“I am, too… Um, but…”

The realization came to her during their conversation. This really wasn’t where Miyo was supposed to be.

She had someone she wanted to be family with. A person she wanted to live alongside whom she could shoulder burdens with and who would support her.

She wanted to believe it wasn’t too late.

When Miyo unconsciously stood up from her chair, it happened.

The door flew open as though it had been kicked down, and Arata entered with an intense look on his face.

“What’s wrong, Arata?”

Yoshirou asked with a frown, sensing something was amiss.

“I only got ahold of this information a little while ago, but…”

He trailed off for a moment as he glanced over at Miyo, a difficult look on his face.

The atmosphere in the room grew thick with silence.

“A moment.”

Picking up on something, Yoshirou exited the room with his grandson.

Whatever the news was, it didn’t seem to be good; Miyo felt a vague sense of dread grow in her chest. Although she hesitated for a brief moment, she made up her mind and followed after the two men.

When she continued down the hallway, making sure to conceal the sounds of her footsteps, she found the two of them conversing in low voices next to the stairway.

“—…lse?”

“Kudou…then—he was… Yes.”

What did he just say?

Despite being too far away to pick up the conversation, she got a bad feeling about what they were discussing, so she took greater care to eavesdrop on the pair.

“You know that for sure?”

“Yes. The information came from a reliable source.”

“…What’re the details of the situation?”

“Not much has changed from what we were told in advance. The spirits from the Burial Grounds surged close to a farming village, and since a passerby lost his life, the Special Anti-Grotesqueries Unit decided to take up a wholesale subjugation operation. During the battle…”

The instant she heard “Special Anti-Grotesqueries Unit,” Miyo froze on the spot. Her panic pounded deep in her ears.

“No one else in the unit seems to have sustained injuries. It was just their commander, Kiyoka Kudou, who—”

She focused every single nerve in her body on the conversation as much as possible, forgetting even to breathe.

Just as Arata’s next statement was about to pass his lips, her body rushed out from her hiding spot of its own accord.

“Wh-what did you say happened to Kiyoka…?”

“Miyo…?!”

Yoshirou’s and Arata’s eyes bulged wide; they were clearly blindsided to learn Miyo had been listening.

“One more time… Say it one more time. What happened…?”

Though she knew it must be her own voice coming out of her mouth, it didn’t feel real at all. Her legs were quivering. She was scared to hear it. Yet she had to be sure.

Standing before Miyo, whose eyes were locked unwaveringly on him even as she trembled, Arata gulped in recoil.

“Miyo, return to your room.”

She couldn’t go back. Not in this situation.

Miyo shook her head.

“Please go back.”

“I can’t.”

“Go!”

“……”

No matter how much he shouted at her, Miyo didn’t back down.

She stared unblinking at Arata, making her intentions clear.

After they glared silently at each other for a few moments, Arata ruffled his bangs, an uncharacteristically rough gesture from him.

“…The enemy defeated Kiyoka and took him out.”

His clear restatement of what he’d said before dispelled any possibility that she had misheard him.

However, it was so hard to believe that Miyo simply ruminated on his words. She couldn’t process them.

“Defeated…? Taken out…?”

“That’s right. Kiyoka Kudou was defeated in battle against an opponent.”

Now defiant, Arata dispassionately informed her of this with a blank expression, while Yoshirou remained silent beside him, arms folded.

In contrast to the all-too-calm pair, Miyo unconsciously descended into a state of panic.

“……! What are you talking about…?!”

Her voice flew from her mouth like a shout.

Defeated? What does that mean?

Her mind went blank as the same thoughts turned over and over in her head. All the while, her heart throbbed like a drum, and she found it hard to breathe.

Frozen down to her fingertips, she sent a bewildered look at Arata.

“If you’re asking what happened, I don’t know the details. An enemy attack must have wounded him during the mission… He collapsed and has yet to regain consciousness.”

“Impossible. That can’t be true.”

There had to be some mistake. She couldn’t believe it. She didn’t want to.

“It’s absolutely true. This is conclusive information.”

Arata mercilessly repudiated Miyo’s ramblings.

Meeting with Kiyoka one more time. Apologizing until he forgave her and living together with him for good this time… Those thoughts had filled her mind just moments before.

Was she going to lose something again? Both the people and the things she cared about the most?

This sorrow—would it keep on going until she was empty inside, until she had nothing left?

Trying to dispel these horrible visions, Miyo shut her eyes tight and covered both ears with her hands.

This was another nightmare. She was sure it had to be. It was nothing but a terrible dream.

I’ll wait like this until I wake up. If I do that, then…

She should wake up back in the warm house she once knew.

“Miyo.”

Hearing her name pulled her back to reality. When she lifted her eyelids, she was met with Yoshirou’s worried visage.

He was an Usuba. This was the Usuba household.

The everyday scenery she longed for was on the verge of being lost forever.

“Kiyoka couldn’t… He couldn’t possibly be defeated…”

He was strong.

His fight against Arata was the only time she had seen her fiancé in battle. Kiyoka’s presence had been overwhelming, dazzling even as she watched Arata injure him. It was impossible to imagine that light being erased for good.

In Miyo’s world, Kiyoka’s presence was almost like the sun or the moon. There was absolutely no way it would ever disappear. She couldn’t imagine a world without him.

Suddenly, Miyo raised her head.

…Nothing’s set in stone yet.

Arata hadn’t told her that Kiyoka was dead.

She had already decided to hold on to him no matter what, hadn’t she? She hadn’t heard anything conclusive about her fiancé at all. If she simply grieved and gave up now, she’d be just the same as she’d been before.

She completely forgot herself. Before she realized it, she had broken into a run.

“Miyo!”

Though she heard Yoshirou and Arata call her name, her legs didn’t stop moving.

Practically tumbling down the stairs, she rushed to leave the house with only the clothes on her back.

“Miyo! Wait!”

Right as she made it to the entryway, Arata caught up to her and grabbed her by the shoulder.

Startled, she gasped. When she slowly turned around, she noticed he was tearful.

“Arata…”

“Please don’t go. Stay here.”

The fever that had recklessly propelled her forward gradually cooled. Though not enough to make her stiffen in place. She just grew a bit more levelheaded.

It was impossible for her heart not to waver at Arata’s plea. He’d done a perfect job of expressing his impatience and frustration. If Miyo were to disappear from his side, this man who possessed power but couldn’t do anything with it, he would again have to smother his feelings to keep on living.

Nevertheless, Miyo had something she wouldn’t compromise on, either.

“I cannot do that.”

“Why not?”

“I want to be with Kiyoka. I don’t want to give up on him.”

“Does it truly have to be him and him alone? Am I not good enough?”

Arata was acting like a child who was about to be abandoned. But there was no need for that.

Miyo took a deep breath. If she broke down now, she would almost certainly be unable to reach Kiyoka’s side.

“Of course you’re good enough. I think you’re a very charming man.”

“Then, wouldn’t you be just as fine with me?”

“…No. Kiyoka’s who I want. Being here’s made me realize that no one else will do.”

The family she longed for could be found in this house, too. Both Yoshirou and Arata had gladly welcomed Miyo with open arms.

Before this, all she’d wanted was to escape from the Saimoris and find a place to belong. If she could live a quiet life, then it didn’t matter whom she ended up marrying. If her spouse ended up being a quiet and gentle person, then nothing could have made her happier. Miyo would have been thrilled to live with the Usubas had they taken her in back then.

But now, the only thing she felt in this house was a constant, lingering sense of discomfort.

Waking up early, preparing breakfast. Seeing Kiyoka off, doing the laundry, cleaning. Mending fraying kimonos and studying with any free time she had. Day would turn to night, she’d greet Kiyoka as he returned home, and then they’d sit down to dinner. She loved relaxing over a cup of tea with him after they’d finished their baths.

That was the happiness Miyo longed for. The daily life she didn’t want to let go of.

As long as she stayed in this house, she’d make comparisons. Every time she did, she could hear a relentless scream echo inside her heart.

That this wasn’t right. That this wasn’t where she was supposed to be or where she wanted to be.

“Forgive me for selfishly refusing to honor the outcome of your duel. But please. Let me go.”

She cast her head deep down toward the floor.

In the corner of her eye, she glimpsed Arata tightly clench his fists.

“I… No, it’s impossible. I really can’t afford to let you leave like this.”

Impatience welled up inside her when she saw him shake his head.

She needed to rush to Kiyoka’s side as fast as she possibly could. Even though there might not be anything she could do for him if she went, just the thought of unknowingly losing someone so precious to her was abhorrent.

The urge to reach him faster, and faster still, spurred her on.

“I’ll come back here again. I don’t have to be out for long, either. Please, let me go.”

“It’s truly out of the question… While I do want to stop you, I’m not the one who wishes to keep you locked up inside this house.”

Miyo remembered that Yoshirou had said the same thing. That he’d been strictly ordered not to let Kiyoka and Miyo see each other. Someone wanted to keep her shut away… Was that it?

She couldn’t believe someone could benefit from going to such lengths.

“I don’t care what ends up happening to me. As long as I can go see Kiyoka.”

“Yes, but…I’ll take the chance here to confess. I’ve made a deal with a certain individual.”

“A deal?”

“That’s right,” he replied, looking torn.

Miyo confronted Arata head-on, listening to the details he was about to divulge.

“…The person I made a deal with is the emperor.”

“What…?!”

She was at a loss for words at the unbelievable shock.

That can't be true, can it? The emperor's…

The exalted one, the man who stood at the very pinnacle of the nation.

He was far too distinguished an individual to make any equitable deals with. Being on an acquaintance basis with him seemed impossible to begin with; her cousin was far more frightening than she could have ever imagined.

"What kind of deal exactly?"

"…I wanted to invite you into this house. But the Kudous were protecting you flawlessly, so I had neither physical nor social avenues of making that happen. That's when His Majesty summoned me."

According to Arata, the emperor had some ulterior motive in mind as well.

With their interests aligned, they collaborated to achieve both of their goals.

"His Majesty also foresaw that there would soon be an incident that would cause significant trouble for the Special Anti-Grotesqueries Unit. Hearing this, I used the information as a pretext for contacting Kiyoka Kudou."

"…So you're saying that the person who isn't letting me go is…?"

"His Majesty. I'm not privy to what he's trying to do, either. He simply agreed to lend me his aid after I said I wanted to take you in as a member of the Usuba family…"

Arata frowned before continuing with a caveat.

"His Majesty is quite unsparing. He'll likely punish me if I disobey him."

"…And the rest of the Usubas, too, right?"

Defying the emperor. Doing that was a grave, unforgivable crime regardless of whether their orders were official. She couldn't imagine what punishment would result from it.

"I…"

If Miyo had been the only one who would suffer in this scenario, there would be absolutely no need to hesitate. However, if the Usubas were going to be wrapped up in it, too…

"Miyo. I serve the wielder of Dream-Sight—you. That's what I wish to do. It would bring me no greater satisfaction than to get involved in your affairs."

"But…"

Arata's wavering eyes were now clearly set.

"You want to go, don't you? To Kiyoka Kudou's side. I've made up my mind, too."

"Huh…"

"Please, go to him. In return, I'll be coming with you."

"Hng!"

Miyo's eyes widened at her cousin's totally unexpected response.

If he was going to come with her, then that meant…

"…Are you sure? Um, will you be breaking your family's code?"

"Oh, almost certainly, I'd say. There's also the chance my identity as a member of the Usubas will be revealed as well. But just like you can't give up on Kiyoka Kudou, I can't give up on you, either."

"I-is that so…?"

"That's right. Plus, I can't let you go on your own."

Growing embarrassed, Miyo cast her eyes down.

Now that she thought about it, she didn't know where to go or how to get there on her own. She was moments from rushing out of the house, only to be at a total loss as to what to do next.

"…That's right, isn't it? You agree, too, Grandad?"

Arata turned around to see Yoshirou behind him. Wearing a serious expression on his face, the old man gave a deep sigh.

"What choice do I have? You're my precious grandchildren, the both of you. It's my duty as your grandfather to support you."

"Thank you."

"Thank you so much…!"

Together with Arata, Miyo took off running, leaving the Usuba home behind.

⚜ *CHAPTER 4* ⚜

Light in the Darkness

They no longer had any time to lose.

Even as they hurried for all they were worth, Miyo's mind still restlessly jumped from one thing to the next.

"Where should we head…?"

"If Kiyoka Kudou is still unconscious, I don't think he'll be at the Special Anti-Grotesqueries Unit station. The hospital's a consideration, but personally, I'd wager he's either at the Kudou main estate or the house where you both lived together."

Relying on these predictions, they headed toward Miyo's previous home, with Arata at the wheel of the Tsuruki family automobile.

Though Arata claimed he wasn't very used to driving, he still managed to speed through the streets without any hints of danger.

From the passenger seat, Miyo prayed for Kiyoka's safety.

Please, please…

She wanted him to regain consciousness. She wanted to see him looking well.

"I know it may be weird to hear this from me, but…"

Arata meekly began as he continued to drive.

"I'm sure he'll be okay. Kiyoka is truly strong. If he'd been in peak form, I wouldn't have been able to beat him in a feat. Though I suppose that's troubling to admit since I'm part of the family tasked with deterring other Gift-users…"

Then he confidently added, “It’s impossible to believe some roving spirits could kill him.”

Miyo couldn’t imagine what these grudge-bearing souls of the dead that Kiyoka’s unit was up against were like. Thus, all she could do was steadfastly take Arata at his word.

After clearing the central area of the capital, which was choked with buildings and people, they gradually continued on into the quiet suburbs.

But the familiar streets amplified rather than calmed Miyo’s anxieties. Whether she wanted to or not, they made her recall both her calming everyday existence and the despair she’d felt when she lost it all.

“At any rate, you shouldn’t torment yourself. Now that we’re out of the Usuba premises, the barrier that was suppressing your Gift from going out of control is gone, too. If your Dream-Sight powers start running wild again, they’ll put a strain on your body.”

“…Thank you for worrying about me, Arata.”

As Miyo replied in appreciation, a smile somehow found its way to her face.

She probably wouldn’t have been able to do anything if she were alone. Her cousin was someone she could depend on even after knowing what she was up against, so having him here was very reassuring.

“I’ll always be on your side no matter what.”

Since their first meeting, he’d never once wavered. Despite his dissatisfaction with his situation, Arata must have remained steadfast because he was proud of his abilities, his role, his family…and his own effort.

Yoshirou had told her that Miyo and Arata were similar, but he was far more upstanding than her. He shined far more brightly.

"No matter what."

She could tell those were precisely his intentions. He hadn't been exaggerating.

"I believe you."

"Let's hurry."

The automobile picked up speed.

The car was surely attracting strange looks since it was tearing down the tranquil country roads with terrifying speed. Nevertheless, it was thanks to their pace that they arrived at the house in the blink of an eye.

No sooner had the car come to a stop than Miyo ran straight toward the entryway.

Just then, right as she placed her hand on the front door, it happened.

She heard a loud crash come from inside the house.

Huh? Wh-what could that be…?

It was quite a loud noise, like something heavy slamming full force into something hard. On top of it, she could make out angry voices, so it appeared there were people inside.

"I'll go in first. I want you to follow up behind me."

"Okay."

Nodding to Arata's offer as she followed behind him, Miyo stepped into the entryway and saw…

…two familiar men wrestling each other.

"You little! What d'ya mean, you can't heal the commander?!"

The angry shout had come from Kiyoka's subordinate, Godou. Beside him was Kazushi Tatsuishi, who was nonchalant as Godou grabbed him by the collar and showered him with fury.

"I mean exactly what I said. There's nothing I can do for him, so what else do you want me to say?"

"You got a lotta nerve saying that with a straight face! Didn't you say you're good at disenchanting?!"

"Please, you've got it all wrong. I said I was skilled at *dispelling*, not disenchanting."

"Screw your semantics!"

Godou had completely lost his cool, which was something Miyo would have never imagined, given his typically casual demeanor. Conversely, Kazushi was as laid-back and unperturbed as always.

"It's not semantics. You're his aide and you don't even know that? Unbelievable."

"Shut up! Who the hell do you even think you are anyway? After your family was spared, thanks to His Excellency and Kiyoka's good graces, you didn't even show up after we sent for you!"

"I'm not the one who needs to quiet down, I think…"

Miyo hadn't the slightest idea what had led these two to be arguing like this.

For the time being, she passed in front of the living room to try and avoid interrupting the pair and made for Kiyoka's study and bedroom.

Her chest ached with tension. Her hands were trembling so badly that she couldn't get her fingers on the sliding door.

It's okay… It's going…to be okay.

She took a long, deep breath for a moment.

Forgetting to announce herself, she pulled on the sliding door with everything she had.

“Miyo…?”

The first thing she noticed was Hazuki, whose face was blank with surprise.

She shifted her gaze down to find a sight so shocking that the world practically went black right before her eyes.

“K-Kiyoka…?”

Her fiancé lay absolutely still on his futon. His already porcelain complexion had grown even paler, as though he were drained of life.

She didn’t want to think about it. In this state, he was so far past the point of frailty that it seemed as if he were a wax doll.

Struggling to move her body before it lifelessly collapsed, Miyo sat down beside him.

“Kiyoka.”

Still overcome with despair, Miyo unconsciously clasped Kiyoka’s ice-cold hand. She could feel a faint pulse when she clasped her hand around his wrist.

He’s alive…

He was breathing. She hadn’t lost him yet.

Tears of relief spilled from her eyes. Suddenly, she felt warm arms gently wrap themselves around her from behind.

“Miyo. Thank you. I’m so glad you’re here. I was so worried that you’d both be separated from each other when the time came to say good-bye forever.”

“I… Hazuki, I’m so sorry…”

Hazuki's tearful voice made it clear to her just how worried, how anxious, Kiyoka's sister had been.

Guilty yet happy that Hazuki had believed in her, Miyo was once again moved to tears.

"Don't apologize. It's okay. Kiyoka told me everything."

"But it's all because I didn't trust him that things ended up like this… Words can't express how regretful I am."

In his current situation, she couldn't do anything to make things right.

She was glad that Kiyoka was alive. But what if he stayed unconscious and simply…? The terrifying path her mind wandered down overwhelmed her with sorrow and remorse.

"I see, so he was engulfed in the intense grudge of a spirit."

Suddenly, the voice of the cousin she had completely left behind came from nearby.

Hazuki whirled around to face him and shouted in surprise.

"Y-you…!"

"Right, thank you for your help the other day, Miss Hazuki Kudou."

Arata gave a cordial smile as he greeted her disingenuously.

"What exactly is the meaning of this, Miyo?"

"U-um, well, you see—"

"I came along with her… I am her cousin, after all."

He plainly disclosed the whole truth in Miyo's flustered stead.

Hazuki wavered for a brief moment before she appeared to recall something. Then shock came over her as she put her hand over her mouth and stiffened.

“You’re kidding. Then that means you’re…”

“Exactly who you imagine I am, most likely. Oh, but please don’t get the wrong idea. I have no hostile intentions toward you or Kiyoka, and I’m not looking to meddle in the situation at all. My job is simply to protect Miyo and support her.”

“Well, then…”

Hazuki readily gave up on any further questions, and Yurie, who had been sitting quietly in the corner of the room and staying out of the conversation, interjected to put a stop to it all.

“Miss Hazuki! Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“Well, it looks fine to me, I’d say.”

“…I find myself worried.”

Seeing the maid sigh, Miyo cut in.

“Yurie. Arata promised he would be my ally. Please trust him.”

“…Miss Miyo…”

“He’s very dependable. Thank you so much for worrying on my behalf.”

She smiled as she spoke, prompting Yurie to hastily dab her teary eyes with her sleeve.

“Miss Miyo, you’ve grown into such a splendid woman…”

“Y-you’re exaggerating.”

She wasn’t splendid whatsoever. All she had done was shed some of her hesitation.

Once she had decided to believe in Arata, it was important that she maintain her belief. Recent events had made this lesson painfully clear.

Since she hadn't trusted Kiyoka to accept her, Miyo had not only failed to confide in him about her worries, but also decided to avoid him altogether. Thanks to that, now she wasn't sure if she would even be able to apologize to him or not.

Harboring doubts about your partner was a recipe for their feelings to drift away from you.

"If I may have a moment. There's something I'd like to discuss."

Arata raised his hand amid the momentarily silent room.

"And what might that be, Mr. Cousin of Miyo?"

"…This is just a guess, mind you. But I believe there's a way to wake Kiyoka up."

His words left everyone in shock. Not just the three women, either, as even Godou broke from his scuffle in the living room to appear and ask Arata if he was telling the truth.

"Yes. That said, it will definitely be difficult… It's a miracle in and of itself that he still draws breath after being showered in the all-consuming grudge of the dead."

"Kiyoka can be saved…?"

"With the power of Dream-Sight."

Miyo gulped.

The supernatural ability of Dream-Sight could bring Kiyoka back from the brink. In other words, Miyo held Kiyoka's life in her hands.

"No way."

I can't use my power at all, though.

She hadn't ever used her Gift consciously. Thus far, it had only run out of control. Controlling it of her own volition and using it to save Kiyoka was an utterly impossible task.

As she took in the gazes of everyone gathered there, a cold sweat formed on her brow.

“Miyo. What will you do? Will you try it, or will you give in?”

“I—I could never do that…”

Arata’s calm eyes unsettled her. It almost felt as though he was testing her.

Was Miyo going to make use of this opportunity or let it go to waste?

The tension now was incomparable with what she had been feeling before. Saddled with everyone’s expectations, she held the life of her beloved in the palm of her unreliable hand.

Can I really use it? My Gift?

She had always wished to awaken a Gift inside her. Yet now that the time had come to use it, her hands trembled nonstop, and she could barely breathe.

Miyo couldn’t stand how ashamed she felt. Nevertheless.

“Arata, do you really think I’ll be able to save Kiyoka…?”

The thought of losing everything without lifting a finger to stop it was too much for her to bear.

If she gave up now, she’d feel guilty for letting Arata betray the emperor himself by accompanying her, and a lifetime of remorse wouldn’t adequately express her own regret.

“I can’t say anything for sure. It’s nothing more than a hypothesis. That being said, I do believe it’s worth attempting.”

Even if it was only the smallest of possibilities, so long as there was hope, she had to try.

Miyo gave a big nod, choking back tears that were threatening to overflow.

"…I understand. I'll do it."

With Miyo's mind made up, Hazuki squeezed her hand.

"Don't push yourself too far. We're obviously all worried for Kiyoka, but all of us here are concerned for you, too. Because you're important to us. Because we love you, got it? Don't forget that."

"Thank you. I won't."

What wonderful words they were to hear.

A smile welled up from Miyo's heart. Then, she gently squeezed Hazuki's hand back.

"Me too. I love you all."

One by one, she passed her eyes over Yurie and Godou, who had both fixed their gaze on her, and then at Kazushi, who'd joined them just moments ago. As if in confirmation of what Hazuki had said, Miyo could sense their concern for her in each person's eyes.

Warm feelings bubbled up from her heart. This surely must have been what kindness and affection were supposed to feel like.

"Please teach me, Arata. How can I use my Gift?"

Arata, who had been watching silently over Miyo making her decision, turned toward Yurie with a small sigh of relief.

"Would you be able to prepare a futon set for me? Please lay it out right here."

"…A futon?"

"That's right. We'll have you sleep there, Miyo. When you use your Gift, I bet it'll separate your consciousness from your body."

Following Arata's instructions, another futon was spread out next to Kiyoka's, and Miyo lay on top of it.

"Next, when employing your Gift, touching the skin of who you're using it on will make it more reliable. Miyo, grab his hand."

"Okay."

She touched Kiyoka's bloodless, snow-white hand. Though it was cold enough to turn to ice, it felt almost warm to Miyo, whose own hand had gone frigid with anxiety.

When she closed her eyes, it felt as though some murky black substance had traveled through their connected palms and flowed into her.

"What is this…?"

"Do you feel it? That's a part of the ghost's grudge. Though now it's turned into a poison that gnaws at the human soul."

Poison. Arata's way of describing it made perfect sense.

She got the vague impression that this murky presence had enveloped Kiyoka, swallowing his heart and consciousness. Miyo needed either to get rid of it or to force her fiancé's enshrouded consciousness back to the surface.

Gradually, both the sounds around her and the presence of the people in the room began to recede into the distance. Amid all this, the calm voice of her cousin was the only thing that remained loud and clear.

"Miyo, focus and imagine this clearly. You've left your flesh behind and have entered Mr. Kudou's body as nothing more than a soul. You're going to locate his soul."

"Okay…"

Miyo visualized herself as nothing more than an agile floating soul flying inside Kiyoka, who was completely enveloped in the all-consuming grudge of a ghost. Then, she wished for it to become reality.

When she did, she suddenly felt her body grow light as a feather and float up into the air.

Incredible.

Once she opened her eyes, she didn't see a ceiling above her, but rather a pitch-black darkness extending out as far as the eye could see.

Miyo unconsciously squeezed both her arms around herself. Endless, infinite…this world draped in black in all directions was terrifying. It felt as if she'd get swallowed up in it, too.

But I have to keep going.

Gritting her teeth hard, she took a step forward.

She didn't have any idea where she even was, but for the time being, she continued moving forward.

Arata's voice reached her no longer. She was genuinely alone.

Suddenly, all the courage she'd mustered shriveled up; in its place came memories from when she'd been young of being locked away in the storehouse.

Scared and hopeless, Miyo viewed the world before her through a curtain of tears.

It brought home to her how little she had changed. She had always been alone, and no one had ever come to save her. All by herself in a darkness that stretched out into infinity.

Where are you, Kiyoka…?

Miyo trudged through the darkness. She wanted to believe she was moving forward, but since she was surrounded by nothing but blackness, she didn't have anything to ground her belief in.

How long had it been since she'd gotten here?

Her sense of time was vague. It felt both as though only a few minutes had passed and several hours had gone by. Just then, however, Miyo heard a faint noise.

Is that sound from the outside world? Or is it coming from the darkness?

As she approached the source of the noise, indistinct scenery gradually came into view.

That's the night sky…

Up above, a clear night sky filled with stars stretched out before her eyes. When she looked down at her feet, she found a leveled-out, dirt country road, exactly like what she'd see in the real world. There were mountains nearby, vegetation grew thick along the path, and the sounds of insects began to filter into her ears.

Where is this?

The abrupt change of scenery perplexed her.

Although the landscape closely resembled the area around the house she shared with Kiyoka, this place seemed unfamiliar overall. She wasn't completely clueless about her location, however, since she knew that she was within the boundaries of the empire.

Still, why in the world had she ended up in a place like this?

The smells of nature were so real that she couldn't instantly determine whether she was in the world of reality or illusion.

But my body should be asleep in the house right now…

In that case, she had to be inside an illusionary world that had sprouted up inside the darkness.

As she stood frozen in blank amazement, a sound of something moving over the grass—probably someone in shoes stepping through the foliage—drifted to her across the subtle breeze.

Someone was there. Miyo knew who it was.

“Kiyoka!”

She couldn’t see him. Nevertheless, she dashed off in the direction of the noise.

Her body was light, and it was easy to breathe. She could keep on running until the ends of the earth like this.

That has to be—no, it’s definitely *Kiyoka.*

She was certain, whether it was rational or not.

Kiyoka was fighting against something all alone in this world of night. That something had to be the very thing that had engulfed him—the intense grudge of the dead.

She wanted to see him as fast as possible.

Miyo sprinted down the night road with everything she had.

Emitting dull lights of red, black, and purple, an endless number of murky spirits drew toward him as he wove through the trees.

Though the spirits had a vaguely human form, Kiyoka could scarcely distinguish the genders of these melting clay, doll-like figures as he turned them to ash with his supernatural fire.

Just how long had he been going on like this?

Kiyoka then realized he had been battling nonstop in this forest of night, defeating the endless waves of spirits advancing toward him.

I really thought I had died back there, but…

Kiyoka thought back over what had transpired before he ended up here alone.

That night.

The Special Anti-Grotesqueries Unit had been in the middle of carrying out a large-scale operation to eradicate the spirits that had been released from the Burial Grounds.

Unfortunately, this was prompted by a civilian accidentally coming into contact with one of the spirits on a road at night and losing their life. That was why Kiyoka had been called in on his day off.

Now that there were casualties, he had no time to waste.

With both the Ministry of the Imperial Household and the military in consensus, the Special Anti-Grotesqueries Unit moved to begin their suppression operation.

First, Kiyoka took command from operational headquarters with Godou. However, the vengeful souls of the deceased Gift-users were both formidable and overwhelming in number, which forced his unit into a very difficult engagement.

Kiyoka couldn't let this incident keep him occupied for too long. He wanted to settle it quickly and rush to Miyo's side. Thus, while he was their commander, Kiyoka left the operational headquarters to Godou and joined the front lines himself.

It had probably been the right call.

I guess my real failure was misjudging the power of these vengeful spirits.

The Gift-users continued to possess their powers even in death. Freed from the shackles of their physical bodies, their souls had grown to surpass the level of strength they'd attained in life.

While the spirits were by no means unbeatable on account of their sluggish movements, which lacked both thought and volition, the power of their hatred definitely posed a threat. Even in his unit, the fight would take a toll on anyone who was remotely flagging in strength.

It had been nothing more than a coincidence.

Kiyoka saw that one of his troops battling a spirit nearby was moments away from falling prey to its intense grudge.

"Watch out!"

Yelling, Kiyoka suddenly jumped between the onslaught of malice and the unit member to sweep the attack away with his Gift, taking out all the spirits in the area with it. Unable to stand against his power, the vengeful souls dispersed like ash, completely extinguished.

However, while he had successfully eradicated the vengeful spirits in a single blow, right before he'd used his supernatural ability, Kiyoka had accidentally come into direct contact with the grudge.

I can't call it anything less than carelessness.

As he wielded his supernatural abilities left and right at the oncoming spirits, Kiyoka heaved a sigh, recalling his blunder.

Normally, he would have never allowed those vengeful souls to do him in. Gift-user society wasn't so weak that he could pride himself on being the strongest among them and still lose to those things.

Still, the reality was that the grudge had instantly enveloped his mind. The next thing he knew, he'd been greeted by this constant, all-encompassing nighttime battle. He believed that most of the spirits had been dealt with and that his unit was able to hold their ground without incident, but…

Am I in a dream? Or is this hell?

Kiyoka had lost consciousness and ended up here. He was sure of that. But he had no idea how to make it back to his world.

Though the possibility remained that there wasn't any way to go back at all, he couldn't even be sure of that, either.

It was almost as if he was continuing their operation here—or at least reenacting it.

But unlike in the real world, here the vengeful spirits poured forth endlessly, and no matter how many hours passed, the moon never descended from its spot high in the sky. As the abnormal passage of time continued, the possibility that this could go on forever crossed his mind. Strangely, he didn't feel any physical exhaustion, but the fact that there seemed to be no end in sight depressed him.

Coating his naked saber in supernatural lightning, Kiyoka eradicated the slow-moving ghosts in a single blow.

"Damn!"

No sooner had he erased the spirits than they regained their forms one after the other.

Kiyoka was so mentally worn-out that he could no longer mask his annoyance. It dawned on him that his breathing had grown slightly ragged.

Not in a place like this…

Abandoned, with everything left unfinished.

What would Miyo think if he died? Would she weep again? Or would she live happily with the Usubas? Forgetting all about him.

He closed his eyes and bitterly gritted his teeth as a single line of sweat ran down his face.

"Kiyoka."

…Suddenly, he thought he heard Miyo's voice.

There was no way that was possible. This clearly wasn't the real world. If he could make out her voice here, either his ears were playing tricks on him or a Grotesquerie was trying to confuse him.

A self-deprecating chuckle escaped his lips.

Was he really that discouraged? Enough to unconsciously yearn for his fiancée.

"Kiyoka."

There it was again.

When he wondered if he had always been so weak, he grew disgusted with himself, and his smile faded.

"Kiyoka. Please don't fight anymore."

"Miyo?"

The voice he heard was so clear and close to him that he turned around in surprise.

Flowing black hair and light that shone in her clear eyes like obsidian. There was no mistaking his fiancée, clad in the kimono of a shrine maiden, standing there before him.

Miyo looked straight at him and grabbed Kiyoka's empty hand… Her slightly rough palm felt warm to the touch.

"Kiyoka."

"…Is it really, truly you, Miyo?"

"Yes."

Miyo nodded definitively.

He must have really been losing his mind to believe this illusion. Despite this, Kiyoka's body moved on its own, bidding him to toss his saber aside and firmly wrap her delicate form in his arms.

"Miyo…Miyo."

“Kiyoka?”

Now he realized.

While he didn’t want to admit it to himself, it appeared he truly had been frightened. Wholly focused on fighting, without knowing whether he was alive or dead.

The warmth of her body alone brought him so much peace.

“…Miyo. Is that really you?”

“That’s right.”

“Why are you here?”

“I came for you.”

“I’m not dead?”

“Of course not!”

Kiyoka couldn’t help laughing at her tone, so forceful and strong.

“‘Of course not’?”

“That’s right. If you died, I’d be so sad, I couldn’t do anything but follow after you.”

“Well, don’t be so hasty.”

However, he was glad as long as neither he nor Miyo was actually deceased.

Kiyoka separated from her, picked up his saber, and once again mowed down the vengeful spirits that were closing in behind them.

In any case, he needed to do something about the constant stream of ghosts, or the two wouldn’t be able to calmly talk with each other.

“…I’ve had quite enough of these things. Miyo, do you know of any way to dispel them and get us back to the real world?”

“Yes, um…maybe.”

While her commanding air had almost made her unrecognizable to him, Miyo frowned with uncertainty. This, too, lasted only a brief moment before she moved forward to stand side by side with Kiyoka.

“What should we do?”

He was ashamed to admit it, but right now, Kiyoka couldn’t figure out a plan to break through the deadlock. Even as he posed this question to Miyo, a new group of vengeful spirits appeared.

Miyo placed her hands on her chest and stared at the ghosts. Then, she whispered to him in a voice so imperceptibly quiet, he thought it would disappear.

“Kiyoka, will you hold my hand?”

“Got it.”

When he did, he felt her ease the tension in her shoulders with relief.

Standing silently under the light of the moon, his fiancée looked beautiful and divine. It surprised him that he was having these thoughts.

Then Miyo did something extremely simple.

“Disappear.”

A single word. Yet the effect was tremendous.

The myriad spirits immediately grew hazy before slowly disappearing like smoke. The ghosts Kiyoka had exhausted himself battling for so long had vanished in an instant.

Stunned, Kiyoka was briefly at a loss for words.

“Miyo, just what was that?”

"…I don't really understand it all myself. It seems to be the power of Dream-Sight."

A Gift that exercised almighty power in a person's dreams.

It did make sense that if this current situation was occurring in Kiyoka's unconscious mind, it would be within the purview of Dream-Sight's powers. Little wonder, then, that Miyo had been able to both come here and erase the vengeful spirits.

He *did* wonder when she had mastered that technique, though.

"I guess you've become a proper Gift-user of your own, huh."

Kiyoka muttered to himself, which made Miyo's eyes open wide.

"Huh?"

"What is it?"

"O-oh, no, it's just… It feels a bit strange to hear myself actually called that."

Miyo tilted her head slightly, her eyebrows pensively furrowed.

It appeared she hadn't really dwelled on that too much. Kiyoka felt as if she had a drastically different presence to her, but apparently, he had been wrong.

He let out a long sigh of relief.

Miyo walked down the completely unlit road still holding Kiyoka's hand.

The moonlight was all they could rely on, but she wasn't apprehensive in the slightest. While she had been filled with nothing but anxiety when she had walked the path alone, just having Kiyoka at her side raised her spirits more than she could have imagined.

She felt deep, wholehearted solace that she'd been able to reunite with him and come to his rescue.

"Quiet, isn't it?"

Kiyoka remarked softly.

There wasn't anyone else there besides the two of them. The only things they could hear were the sounds of insects and the flowing river water.

Though the circumstances were entirely different, Miyo recalled their night from before. The night the two of them had sat side by side and gazed up at the moon.

"But it's a little lonely."

"…It is. This place, is this the inside of my dreams?"

"Um, well. It's probably something like that, I think. I don't really comprehend it fully myself."

Not only were there so many things she still didn't understand, but it also still didn't feel as if she had actually used her Gift. Miyo had simply prayed. Prayed that she wanted to save Kiyoka.

That was why even when her fiancé referred to her as a Gift-user, it had felt like the words were for someone else.

"…Kiyoka."

"What is it?"

There was one thing that Miyo needed to express to him above all else.

She had to do it now. Now was the only chance she would have to tell him.

"I'm sorry."

Miyo stopped walking and gave a deep bow.

She had gotten so many things wrong.

That Kiyoka was kind and would accept her no matter what. Miyo had been so concerned with herself that she hadn't understood his feelings. Deep down, a part of her had even suspected that Kiyoka *couldn't* comprehend her feelings.

How could she have been so foolish? She was so irritated, it made her hate herself.

Terrified of what sort of answer she was going to hear, Miyo closed her eyes.

But she only heard a deep sigh from up above.

"I'm the one who should apologize."

"Huh?"

"Sorry."

When she raised her head, Miyo saw Kiyoka awkwardly shifting his eyes to and fro.

"I lost my head and said some unreasonable things to you. Though I know telling you that I didn't mean to hurt you isn't an excuse."

"No!"

Miyo vigorously shook her head.

"I was in the wrong. You've showed me so much kindness, and I simply wasted it all."

"That's not true."

"I didn't see what was really important. It was the exact same with my studies. On top of selfishly insisting on them, I stubbornly forced myself to keep going with them, until I ended up ignoring everything around me. I tried to do everything all on my own, but in the end, it didn't amount to anything…"

Hearing herself spell it all out made Miyo depressed.

She wanted family. She wanted to become family. But in spite of her desire, the person with the worst understanding of what *family* really meant was Miyo herself. Taking everything on her shoulders and without saying what needed to be said, she had wasted the opportunities that Hazuki and Kiyoka provided her to grow closer and share her burdens with them.

Bonds weren't formed by one-sided approaches, but by two people both trying to grow closer to the other.

"I'm sorry. When I said that I didn't care whether I stayed with you or the Usubas—that was all a lie. If you'll forgive me, I want to be with you. Please. Let me stay at your side from now on."

Bringing out all the courage she could muster, Miyo confessed her true feelings.

She was scared Kiyoka would hate her or find her annoying. She worried that she would never be able to recover if she confessed everything and still wound up being rejected.

But she would never be able to build a trusting relationship with people by refusing to move forward and keeping herself at a standstill.

Kiyoka was silent for a moment, but after a short while, he sighed as he tried to collect his thoughts.

"That was always my intention, even if you didn't ask."

"Kiyoka…"

"If you're all right with someone like me, I'd like you to come back. Can you choose me over the Usubas?"

Her eyes filled with tears.

Was it really okay for everything to go exactly how Miyo wanted? Was this proof that she was simply in a dream where everything she wanted came true? She couldn't help but be suspicious.

But even if this was all a dream, she had only one answer.

"Yes. If you'll have me."

She had gradually warmed up to the two men of the Usuba clan. But she still wanted something different. A different place she wanted to call home and a different person she wanted to be with.

Miyo sniffled between her tears, then felt a big warm hand gently rest atop her head.

"I'm glad. I didn't know what I was going to do if you said you didn't want to be with me anymore."

"I—I would absolutely never say anything like it."

"I wonder about that." Kiyoka smiled. "…Still, though."

"Huh?"

"I actually intended on going to the Usubas myself to take you back, but having you come for me instead makes me look like a total fool…"

Miyo couldn't help smiling a little as she watched Kiyoka slump his shoulders, dejected.

She felt as if she had witnessed a rare departure from his typically stately and dignified demeanor.

"It's okay, Kiyoka. You're always so very charming, no matter what you do."

"…Really now?" he questioned suspiciously.

The two of them gripped each other's hands even tighter, advancing through the darkness with sure steps.

When she at last lifted up her heavy eyelids, a brown wooden ceiling spread out over her hazy vision.

Her mind was dulled, and her whole body felt as heavy as her eyelids.

For a few moments, Miyo stared vacantly up at the ceiling.

“Are you awake?”

Kiyoka abruptly peered over at her with his gorgeous face, which was still beautiful even when fresh from slumber. Her heart skipped a beat from the surprise.

“K-Kiyoka… *Cough!*”

“Calm down. Take a second before trying to talk.”

He gently rubbed Miyo’s back after she started coughing from sitting up in a rush.

“Are you okay now, Kiyoka?”

She studied her fiancé from head to toe as she spoke.

It appeared not much time had passed since Kiyoka himself had woken up, as he still wore his evening *yukata* with his hair hanging loosely down. His complexion was pale, clearly that of a sickly man. Both his tone and expression, however, were stalwart, and it appeared he’d fully returned to consciousness.

“I’d love to say I’m fine, but it’s a hard claim to make when I’m this weak.”

Kiyoka heaved a troubled sigh and put up his hair.

His sluggish movements showed exactly what he meant, and while he didn’t seem quite back to normal, Miyo felt relieved that he looked better.

“I-I’m so glad.”

“Sorry for making you worry.”

“Sniff.”

She couldn’t stop the tears pouring down her face.

Her fear and anxiety had been so tight in her chest until now that she’d felt almost unable to breathe. Finally, at long last, she could feel alive again.

“Don’t cry now… Honestly.”

The next moment, Miyo felt his embrace, and his hand caressing her cheeks, as though he were calming a young child… She was sure to look back on the moment later in embarrassed horror, but for now, Miyo held fast to Kiyoka’s hug and broke into a flood of tears.

“All right, that’s enough crying.”

“K-Kiyoka.”

“What is it?”

“Um, treating me like a kid is a little embarrassing…”

Beginning to get her tears under control, Miyo was beset with an intense sense of shame. Though she tried to raise her face from Kiyoka’s chest, she couldn’t bring herself to do that or separate herself from him.

However, Miyo’s modest protests had absolutely no effect on him.

“But you stop crying if I do this.”

“Th-that’s… That’s not true.”

Now that she thought about it, she seemed to recall another time when he’d comforted her as she sobbed in much the same way.

H-how embarrassing.

She really was a small child if being wrapped up in his arms and having her head patted was enough to soothe her tears. She was already nineteen, and this had happened twice now. Truly unbelievable.

Miyo felt like burying herself in a hole somewhere.

“Ummm, mind if I cut in, you two?”

Hazuki, who was clearly holding back laughter, interrupted the pair. Her voice instantly brought Miyo back to her senses.

Oh no.

She had completely forgotten. If this was her house in the real world, then obviously that meant everyone was still there. In other words, right before everyone’s eyes, she…

The instant it dawned on her, a shameful heat ran from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, which only strengthened Miyo’s urge to let loose an embarrassed scream.

“*Tee-hee-hee.* Well, clearly you two have made up, then. Oh, what a relief!”

“Indeed. I’m so glad.”

Godou meekly agreed after Yurie and Hazuki spoke.

“But this is too much for a bachelor like me to look at.”

“What’s this, Godou, you’re not used to fooling around? So is that frivolous attitude of yours all an act?”

“……”

After Kazushi’s unnecessary comment, the two were about to erupt into another brawl, but when Kiyoka gave a stern “Cool it,” they instantly stopped.

“Pipe down, both of you. Miyo’s getting flustered.”

“I—I am…not…”

While she wasn’t flustered, she *did* feel as if she would never recover from this lifetime’s worth of shame.

“Miyo.”

Her cousin, who had been silently watching until then, called out to her flatly.

“Arata…”

“It seems I’ve been relieved of my duties, so I’ll be heading home now.”

Miyo was unsure what to say to him at his dispassionate declaration, absent his usual smiling face.

In truth, she wanted him to stay there a bit longer, but she also felt it wasn’t right to insist he stay.

“If you’ll excuse me.”

“Arata. Thank you very much.”

Miyo adjusted herself into a proper position and bowed with all the gratitude she possessed. Already making his way out of the room, Arata turned back around and forced a smile.

“I don’t need any thanks. I was simply doing what I wanted to do.”

“I know… And I’m sorry I can’t go back with you. But if you are punished for this, I beg you to let me know. Should that happen, as a member of the Usuba family myself, I’ll accept it with you.”

“You have my word.”

Arata nodded, pulling back the folding screen before Kiyoka, too, called to him.

“Arata Tsuruki.”

“What is it?”

"…Sooner or later, I'm challenging you to a rematch. I won't lose next time."

"Will you now? Well, I wish you luck with that."

Arata grinned before finally departing the room.

⚜ *CHAPTER 5* ⚜

Truth-Revealing Party

A brief time had passed since the day Miyo returned to the house and safely roused Kiyoka from his slumber.

Humid August was gone, and September had come. While they still endured the lingering summer heat some days, the occasional chilly breeze signaled that autumn was on its way.

Finally, the day of the party arrived. Preparations were currently in full swing in Miyo's room at the Kudou residence.

"Oh my! You look great in that, Miyo. You're *very* pretty, I promise."

The excited shout came from Miyo's teacher and soon-to-be sister-in-law, Hazuki.

A long-sleeved kimono, featuring fluttering butterflies and large petals of yellow-and-white flowers elegantly in full bloom against a slightly darker crimson fabric. Wrapped up together with her lavish, gold-threaded sash, and makeup that brilliantly blended flamboyance and composure, Miyo's finished look made her appear many times more mature than normal.

Keiko, the proprietress of the kimono store, Suzushima's, who had hand-delivered the newly made piece for the party, and Yurie, who had helped dress Miyo, both beamed with pride.

"While she wears paler colors quite well, she suddenly gains the beauty of a woman in her prime when you put her in deeper shades."

“Yes, yes, how true. Why, Miss Miyo, you’re so gorgeous, it’s enough to take my breath away.”

Miyo could only look on and smile as best she could while the two older women, each a generation older than her, chattered away in glee.

Ultimately, she couldn’t really tell whether she looked good or not. What really worried her was if it seemed like the kimono was wearing her rather than the other way around. With her plain features, she seemed apt to be swallowed up by her outfit’s magnificence.

“And you know, Miyo won’t be able to wear a long-sleeved kimono for much longer. Now’s her only chance to show off this perfect combination of maturity and innocence.”

“I knew you would understand, Miss Hazuki! You’re absolutely right! It feels like a bit of a letdown to think this will be gone soon, but that reluctance to part with one’s youth and ephemerality makes her all the more beautiful, doesn’t it?”

Jumping at Hazuki’s words, Keiko replied with passion. This was normal for her, so her zeal no longer took Miyo aback.

Instead, when she heard she wouldn’t be wearing a long-sleeved kimono for much longer, she felt a slight blush come to her cheeks as she realized she would be marrying soon.

“You’re very pretty, too, Hazuki.”

“Oh, thank you, Miyo. You think so?”

They were scheduled to gather together after Miyo was ready and head directly to the party, so Hazuki was already fully decked out.

Her light orange dress, decorated with lace, was slightly thinner than the average dress. It matched Hazuki’s slender body very well, and with her light hair tied up high on her head, her bare neck was

captivating. It was as if she was declaring to the world that this was what an adult woman's beauty was all about. Even as another woman, Miyo found herself captivated.

With their preparations complete, the four of them moved to the living room. When they arrived, Kiyoka was there waiting, already dressed in his military uniform.

Over the course of the past month, he had recovered back to full health. His spirits returned in a much shorter time than Miyo had expected, enough for him to start training every day, since he'd insisted that he couldn't stand how sluggish and weak his body felt.

And while his almost transparently porcelain skin remained unchanged, its sickly, convalescent complexion was gone.

"I'm ready, Kiyoka."

"Got it……"

After responding offhandedly and turning around, Kiyoka froze up and had his breath taken away when he glimpsed Miyo.

"What's this? My foolish little brother, unable to take his eyes off his fiancée? Well, what do you think, Kiyoka? Isn't she stunning?"

"……Yeah."

Kiyoka nodded vacantly at Hazuki's teasing smile.

"You're beautiful, Miyo."

"Thank you."

Hearing such straightforward praise made her bashful. She was still a bit nervous about whether her kimono really suited her, but now she was glad to be wearing it.

"…Our car is already here. Let's go."

Kiyoka held out his hand. Miyo did exactly as Hazuki had taught her, placing her own hand on top of his.

It was then she remembered something she had forgotten to say.

“Kiyoka.”

“What?”

“You look very handsome yourself.”

“……”

Miyo was convinced he’d reply with a simple, “I see,” but instead he averted his eyes for some reason and placed his free hand up against his forehead.

He remained fully silent until they had left the house; just when he was about to climb into the automobile, he finally seemed ready to say something and—

“You can’t just say things like that without warning me first…”

—was what he muttered under his breath.

“Hmm? I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it, Miyo. He’s just embarrassed; forget about him.”

When Miyo apologized, unsure what exactly was wrong, Hazuki came up from behind them and ruthlessly cut her brother down. Kiyoka frowned sourly at her remark.

“Be quiet, Hazuki.”

“What? I’m right, aren’t I?”

“All right, all right. Save your bickering for after the party, you two.”

Yurie chimed in, and they were both instantly silenced.

Miyo couldn't help finding it all amusing and smiled. She realized that she wasn't feeling the same envy and jealousy she had before.

Back then, I longed for a family.

She used to feel a bit gloomy whenever she saw the unreserved verbal bouts between Hazuki and Kiyoka. But now those emotions were nowhere to be found.

She was relieved. Now Miyo could say it for sure: She was going to become part of their family.

"*Sigh…* Well then, we're leaving. Get yourself home early, Yurie."

"Bye-bye, Yurie."

"We'll be going now."

"Yes, yes, enjoy yourselves."

Yurie and Keiko saw the three off, and they headed toward the venue. One of the Kudou family servants was driving them.

"Are you nervous, Miyo?"

"Yes… Very nervous."

After returning from the Usuba household, Miyo had thrown herself back into her studies while making sure to rest properly along the way. On top of that, Kiyoka kept a close eye on her to make sure she wasn't overexerting herself while he was recuperating at home.

When she showed the faintest signs of working past her limits, he would force her to rest, so she couldn't have pushed herself even if she'd wanted to.

But thanks to this, she'd made good progress without tearing her body down in the process. Hazuki had also given her seal of approval, declaring that she had taught Miyo everything she could.

But while she had gained some confidence, there wasn't anything that could ease her nerves.

"You don't need to worry; today's party isn't a formal affair. There won't be any sort of stuffy etiquette to follow; so as long as you're with the two of us, there won't be many chances for you to be put on the spot."

"Right, right. Outside of greetings and introductions, you shouldn't have to speak much at all, really."

While there was a tiny part of her that wished to utilize all the rules of etiquette she had studied, it was still her first time at a party, so it would be best for her to concentrate on getting through it without any trouble.

With that in mind, she resolved to quietly observe the scene and take mental notes on everyone's interactions.

The venue was a small hotel in the capital.

Since there wouldn't be dancing at the gathering, it didn't require too large a space. It would be a buffet-style dinner party, the kind you often saw in foreign countries, where guests could enjoy food and drink as they chatted with one another.

"Anyway, if you're able to do everything I've taught you up until now, you'll be fine. No need to be so antsy."

"Okay, I'll do my best."

Miyo clenched her fist and psyched herself up.

"…Like she just said, there's no need to get so worried."

"I suppose at this point, whatever happens, happens."

They arrived at the venue while they were conversing.

Miyo was taken aback when she stepped out of the automobile and looked up at the building.

*This is a…*small *hotel?*

It was totally different from what she'd imagined.

The two-story Western-style building was grand and extravagant.

On the pure white exterior wall were a pair of hefty double doors. Goldwork decorations were inlaid in various places, and the giant, well-polished glass windows sparkled from reflected light. A soft carpet spread out at their feet, and a chandelier, whose design was so delicate it looked as if it would break at the slightest touch, hung down from the ceiling.

Everything she saw was totally unfamiliar to her. Though she'd been given an overview of the party, she couldn't help but feel daunted now that she was actually seeing it in person for the first time.

"Come on now, Miyo. We're at the venue now. Make sure to act exactly as I taught you."

A light tap from Hazuki brought Miyo back to reality.

She was right; Miyo couldn't get distracted now. There were other guests around them, and they were already staring at her.

Puff out my chest, straighten out my back…

Move slowly. Be confident.

In spite of the strangers gazing at her, she strolled forward with composure, a half step behind Kiyoka's dignified stride.

Though she was doing little more than walking, she grew worried that she wasn't doing things correctly. But relief would come whenever the occasional step up or down popped up, and Kiyoka would gently take her hand to support her.

"This is it."

"I'm ready."

Firmly nodding to Kiyoka, Miyo took her first step into the hall.

Wow…

An entirely different world spread out before her eyes.

The ceiling was huge. From the outside, it had looked like a two-story building, but upon entering, she realized that it hadn't been two separate floors, but two floors' worth of open space within the hall. Straight ahead of her stood a stage with its curtains drawn, and a balcony wound around the three opposite sides of the hall.

There were tables everywhere, covered in pure white tablecloths and set with luxurious high-quality food and drink unlike anything she had ever seen. The attendees were already enjoying their meals.

The guests all locked eyes on to the three of them as they entered the hall.

"Miyo. It's okay."

She was all right. She had worked so hard for this moment. She just needed to do what she'd been taught.

"Now then, Miyo. While you two go around greeting everyone, I'll finish most of my salutations as well, so we'll be separated for a little bit. But you can handle it, right?"

It was a little discouraging to be separated from Hazuki, but it was necessary.

Miyo nodded firmly.

"I-I'll be fine…Sis."

"Haah!"

Hazuki smiled with flushed cheeks at Miyo's new form of address, which she'd spoken with bashful, upturned eyes.

“I’m happy you’d call me that, b-but it’s a bit embarrassing to hear it out of the blue… Now listen, Kiyoka, you absolutely can’t leave Miyo to fend for herself. Got it?”

“Yes, yes. I know.”

After Hazuki had finished lecturing her brother, Miyo and Kiyoka watched for a moment as she strode off, looking gallant even on her own, when…

“Oh, Commander!”

“…Godou.”

Kiyoka’s subordinate, already enjoying the party, waved to them as he approached.

His casual air, along with the loathsome expression that grew on Kiyoka’s face when Godou called out to him, were both the same as ever.

Miyo forgot where she was for a moment and broke into a smile.

“Oooh! You look lovely, Miss Miyo.”

“Thank you.”

“Please, I’m merely stating a veritable fact. You really have it good, Commander. I’m jealous.”

“…Listen, you—”

As per usual, Godou paid no heed to his superior’s threats and interjected with an, “Oh, that’s right,” before bringing his hands together.

“You haven’t greeted Major General Ookaito yet, right? I saw him over there.”

“Really? Thanks.”

“Oh, also, you haven’t seen *him* yet, have you?”

“Who?”

Miyo cocked her head as she listened to their conversation. Kiyoka, however, immediately picked up on who Godou was implying.

“You mean Tatsuishi?”

“Please, oh please, don’t say that name out loud! What if he hears you?!”

“…Huh. You guys really can’t stand each other.”

The memory of the two of them grappling with each other was fresh in Miyo’s mind.

Given that both men came off as playboys, at least as far as she could tell, she figured they would have hit it off. This must have been what people meant when they talked about disliking whom they resembled most.

“He’s an expert at pushing people’s buttons. A guy like him, a dispelling specialist? That’s a load of baloney, if you ask me.”

“Don’t say that. You’re only going to be working with him more from here on out.”

“C’mon, Commander, give me a break here!”

Leaving Godou’s pitiful groans behind, Miyo and Kiyoka headed off in Ookaito’s direction.

“You’re aware of Major General Ookaito, if I remember correctly.”

“I am. I’ve only heard about him from Godou, though. He’s your boss, right?”

“Right. He acts like a watchdog for the Special Anti-Grotesqueries Unit. He’s also the organizer of today’s gathering.”

The Ookaitos, a distinguished family known for producing many military men, had put this whole event together. Miyo had only just recently learned about them from Hazuki.

The head of the family, Masashi Ookaito, also seemed to have both a public and a private relationship with Kiyoka. As such, he was always accommodating him, no matter the circumstances.

"I-I'm nervous."

"Well, he does look stern, I'll admit that. But he's a gentle guy, so there's no need to worry."

"…Okay."

Despite his reassurance, Miyo's nervousness showed no signs of abating.

Meanwhile, she heard the voice of a child call out to them from somewhere.

"Uncle Kiyoka!"

Uncle?

It was the first time she had ever heard Kiyoka referred to that way. Surprised, she looked over to where the voice had come from.

Scurrying up to them was a young boy of about ten years old. He was well dressed for a child his age, sporting a black blazer with shorts. As he gazed up at Kiyoka, his large eyes sparkled with delight.

…Wait. He looks an awful lot like someone I know…

Who was it?

Miyo felt slightly disheartened that she couldn't immediately tell herself.

"Oh, Asahi. Haven't seen you in a while."

It was clear the boy was someone her fiancé was familiar with. Kiyoka wore a subtle but rare smile as he crouched down and put a hand on the boy's head.

"Not since New Year's!"

"Suppose you're right."

"Asahi! What did I say about running around during the party?!"

A big man in a military uniform followed after behind the boy, scowling. He seemed to be his father, but the two didn't have much of a resemblance.

"Major General Ookaito, sir."

"Sorry, Kiyoka. Asahi didn't cause any trouble, did he?"

"No, we were just chatting a little. Forgive me for not coming to greet you sooner."

"Don't worry about it. You just got here."

Miyo stared from behind Kiyoka at the stout man in front of her, taking care not to be rude about it.

He looked around forty years old. With his height, wide shoulders, and sturdy physique, he cut a dramatic figure. Though he wasn't necessarily handsome, per se, his facial features were intense and masculine.

It was now clear to Miyo why some women were afraid of him.

"Sir. This is my fiancée, Miyo Saimori."

"A pleasure to meet you."

At Kiyoka's introduction, she made a slow and courteous bow.

While he didn't seem to be an unsparing man, she would be mortified if a careless blunder on her part caused Kiyoka's superior to leave with a bad impression of her.

Or so Miyo thought, but her fear proved to be a groundless one.

“Please, lift you head up. I hate it when I can’t see the face of who I’m talking to.”

“A-absolutely.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Masashi Ookaito. This here’s my son, Asahi. Come now, introduce yourself.”

“Hello. I’m Asahi Ookaito.”

Asahi introduced himself in a childish, slightly high-pitched tone of voice. Though he’d calmed down, a sharp contrast from his energy moments prior, Miyo still couldn’t help feeling soothed by his adorable charms.

“I’m Miyo Saimori… N-nice to meet you.”

Unaccustomed to interactions with children, she gave him a somewhat awkward smile.

Hazuki had taught her that she didn’t need to be too formal with kids, but when push came to shove, she didn’t quite get where that line was drawn.

“Hmph. You’ve found a very beautiful lady here, Kiyoka. Good for you.”

“……And what does that mean?”

Kiyoka replied with displeasure to Ookaito’s teasing remark.

Even Miyo, in all her cluelessness, could understand the pair was quite close with each other from watching them interact.

Nevertheless, neither man seemed to be a skilled conversationalist, so their discussion was shockingly fragmented.

“Kiyoka. How’ve you been feeling after what happened?”

“Fortunately, I’m back to perfect health.”

“Sorry I couldn’t come by and visit you personally.”

“Not at all, sir. The get-well gift you sent was plenty. Thank you very much.”

Kiyoka was right; while he’d been recovering, there were an unexpectedly large number of get-well gifts delivered to the house. The senders comprised a wide variety of people—some were military acquaintances, some were family connections, while others were Kiyoka’s own personal associates.

However, the sheer number of presents made it difficult for Miyo to deal with them all.

Miyo remembered that Ookaito had given them a stylishly designed hand towel. A far more practical item than the sorts of jelly desserts and other gifts of food her fiancé had received.

She’d felt that his thoughtfulness was befitting someone of his status.

“I see… I’m sure you’ve been busy now that you’re back, but I’ve been swamped lately myself as well. There were moments when I worried if this party would even happen.”

“…I wasn’t aware of this.”

“There was a lot I couldn’t be too open about. I could give you the details, but I’d probably get chewed out for it. At any rate, ask me about it later.”

Ookaito punctuated his words with a “Good grief,” and his shoulders drooped.

Miyo couldn’t make heads or tails of what the major general was talking about, and it seemed Kiyoka was in the same boat. The two of them reflexively exchanged glances with each other.

Just then, Asahi shouted.

“Oh, it’s Mother!”

“Hey, stay put.”

Ookaito grabbed his son by the back of his neck as he started to go running off again. Stopped in his tracks, Asahi pouted in visible displeasure.

“But, Father, Mother’s over there.”

“I know, I know, but don’t run. No jogging, either, got it?”

“……Okaaay.”

Still holding on to his son’s neck, Ookaito sighed. “Impish rascal’s always giving me trouble. Honestly, who in the world did you take after?”

“Well, it’s obvious—”

Kiyoka suddenly narrowed his eyes.

“Who, sir? It’s got to be his mother—”

“Oh, what are we talking about now?”

A voice that was very familiar to Miyo abruptly cut into the conversation.

When she turned around, she found Hazuki standing with a beautiful smile on her face.

“Mother!”

Huh?

Having escaped Ookaito’s grip, Asahi readily wrapped his arms around Hazuki with glee. She hugged him back in turn.

“Asahi, have you been behaving?”

“Uh-huh. I’m doing well with both my studying and my training!”

“Are you now? What a good little boy.”

Hazuki was a mother, and Asahi her son. In other words, that meant…

Incidentally, Miyo had felt as though Asahi looked like someone she knew, but now that the two of them were together, the resemblance was as plain as day. There was no denying it.

So that's it. Hazuki's ex-husband is Mr. Ookaito, then.

And Asahi was their child. Everything was consistent with what Hazuki had told her.

Though to be honest, Miyo still had a hard time believing Hazuki was a mother. Nevertheless, seeing her actually act the part in front of her was strangely convincing.

"……Kiyoka."

Miyo pulled subtly on his sleeve and addressed him quietly to make sure the others didn't notice.

"What is it?"

"Hazuki and Asahi look very much alike, don't they?"

"Yeah… And his impishness definitely comes from the same person he got his looks from."

He was right that Hazuki seemed as if she would have been a mischievous kid. Even as an adult, there were times when she had both childlike innocence and too much energy.

"Well, um, so, Hazuki. Been keeping well?"

Ookaito asked, eyes wandering around the hall. This prompted Hazuki to bat her lashes and smile.

"But of course! I really should be asking you that, though. Are you sleeping enough? Eating properly? Keeping yourself busy is all fine and dandy, but ruining your health will make all that hard work go to waste."

“You’re worried about me?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? Do I seem that coldhearted to you?”

“No, no, I didn’t mean it like that…”

“Don’t worry, Mother, I’m making sure to keep a close eye on Father.”

“Oh, thank you, Asahi. Mommy’s reliable little helper, aren’t you?”

The unreserved, lighthearted banter between the three of them was a typical family conversation. A happy family, without a care in the world. It was impossible to tell from the outside that Ookaito and Hazuki were divorced.

Miyo remembered that when Hazuki had touched on her past, she never once said she was bitter or resentful of her ex-husband. Now she understood that, if anything, Hazuki’s regrets stemmed entirely from how much she cared for her former partner.

“What’s wrong, Miyo?”

Kiyoka’s concern, which came in spite of the fact she hadn’t said anything, caught her off guard before slowly permeating into her heart.

Miyo fought to hold back tears that had no good reason to be welling up.

“Nothing, nothing at all.”

“You sure?”

“It’s just, I’m pleased that everyone seems happy…”

Seeing the looks on Hazuki’s, Asahi’s, and Ookaito’s faces made her understand.

Their family might have been a slight departure from the norm. But this was the arrangement that suited them most.

A botched marriage wasn't enough to negate family ties. Miyo knew that was the case because they still loved one another.

"The bonds of family aren't so easily broken."

Yoshirou really had been right.

Family wasn't that fragile. Presented with irrefutable proof of that fact, Miyo couldn't help but be deeply moved.

The party livened up considerably. Now that they had a few drinks in them, the guests were all gaily chitchatting away.

Various entertainers had been introduced onstage about midway through, so now the banquet was in full swing.

Though she was always with Kiyoka or Hazuki and exclusively spent the time listening to their conversation, Miyo had also grown much more accustomed to the environment, so she was slowly beginning to enjoy herself.

"What did I tell you? Parties aren't so bad now, are they?"

"You're right. They're fun once you get used to them."

Miyo nodded giddily as she stood next to Hazuki and sipped from her glass of water.

Despite her agreement, Miyo still didn't have the confidence to stride through the hall by herself like Hazuki.

As she got a handle on things, she realized this was a good opportunity to identify the areas she needed to polish next.

On that note, she was surprised at the frequency with which men she didn't know had struck up conversations with her, so she definitely had some examples to work with.

"Oh, Kiyoka's coming over."

“Looks like it…”

Kiyoka had mingled with some men for a brief while, but Miyo could now see him approaching.

She waved her hand a little, which caused him to suddenly avert his eyes, but when she considered it was simply out of embarrassment, she found his response amusing rather than insulting.

“Miyo. How are you finding the party?”

“That’s the *exact* same thing I just asked her before you came over.”

Hazuki looked exasperated. She was unsure how many times it had happened that day, but Miyo smiled at the concern they both had for her.

“Thank you for worrying about me. I’ve been slowly warming up to it, so I’m fine.”

“You have? I’m glad… Sis, mind if I borrow Miyo for a moment?”

“Fine with me. Go enjoy yourselves.”

Miyo was once again led along by Kiyoka as they moved through the party venue.

“Where are we going?”

“To meet someone who can provide details on a few matters.”

Miyo immediately understood that the “few matters” Kiyoka was talking about were in reference to the recent events with the Usuba family and the Burial Grounds.

But just who was this person who was well informed about it all? If he meant Ookaito, then she wished he had said something before they went to greet him.

Perhaps it involved the reason why the major general had mentioned he was so busy.

As she contemplated this, she was surprised to find that they had left the hall entirely and gone around the back of the building.

They continued walking for a few moments before coming up against a large window on the other side of a terrace.

Where is this…?

The sun had already set, but the terrace looked fairly bright as it was illuminated by gas lamps.

She saw people near the couch on the patio. One was seated while another stood by next to them. From where she and Kiyoka were standing, Miyo could only see their backs.

“Prince Takaihito.”

As usual, the name Kiyoka called out didn’t resonant with her at all. While she felt as if she had heard that name somewhere before, unfortunately Miyo was still very ignorant of the world at large.

Despite the relaxed setting, there was a faint tension in the air, making it clear to her, at least, that the situation was serious.

“You’re here. Please, come hither.”

“As you wish.”

The person seated on the couch beckoned them over.

Her eyes gradually acclimated to the darkness, and as she drew closer, she was able to get a good look at their face.

They were uncannily beautiful. Neither large nor small in stature, they simultaneously resembled both a young boy and a young girl. Their overpowering presence captivated Miyo. She barely managed to deduce from his unadorned yet high-quality kimono that he was a man.

He might not have been of this world at all. The man who inspired such awe smiled as he drank from his sake cup.

“This must be the Saimori girl, yes?”

“That’s right. This is my fiancée, Miyo Saimori.”

“P-pleasure to meet you.”

It was the same greeting she had repeated over and over that day, and yet she couldn’t properly get the words out. The tense atmosphere had affected her more than she’d realized.

She was only able to breathe because she had Kiyoka standing at her side.

Her stalwart fiancé then gently whispered in her ear.

“This is the emperor’s second son and bearer of the ability of Divine Revelation, Prince Takaihito.”

“His Majesty’s…?!”

She couldn’t believe it. No wonder she felt as if she had heard the name before.

There was no doubt that any citizen in the country had often spied the name on the pages of magazines and newspapers.

Miyo’s face went markedly pale.

“Please, please,” Takaihito said with a faint smile.

“There is no need for any formalities. As you can see, before you sits not the son of the emperor but merely Kiyoka’s childhood friend, Takaihito.”

“B-but still…”

“Miyo. It’s all right.”

“O-okay.”

Though she assented, she still couldn't help being anxious since she was so inexperienced. She worried that she would unwittingly commit some grave discourtesy.

Miyo quietly made up her mind to do her best to remain silent.

It was then that she finally had the presence of mind to look at the other person who remained standing quietly behind Takaihito.

So it was Mr. Ookaito, then.

She greeted the large military man, whom she'd met for the first time that very day, with a glance.

With how late it was, Asahi must've already headed home. Ookaito was a military officer, so she could easily expect him to serve as Takaihito's bodyguard.

The imperial prince's security was still far too understaffed. Though it might have been a necessity for him to move about incognito.

"Come, both of you, sit."

Following his suggestion, Kiyoka sat next to Takaihito, while Miyo sat in a chair.

It felt strange to sit as equals with someone like him, but refusing his suggestion would be just as bad. Either way, the development only added more strain on her tense heart.

"A drink, Kiyoka?"

"Thank you."

Kiyoka deferentially took the cup and brought the sake up to his mouth.

"A drink for you as well, daughter of the Saimoris?"

"Oh, um, I, well—"

Hazuki had warned her about imbibing any alcohol. But an offer from royalty was hard to refuse.

As she tripped over her words, Kiyoka promptly rescued her.

“Prince Takaihito, Miyo is unaccustomed to alcohol, so I’d ask for something else, if possible.”

“I see. In that case, let me prepare some other sweet drink for her instead.”

Having managed to get out of that conundrum, Miyo sighed with relief.

It wasn’t long before her beverage was brought to her.

The glass was filled with a slightly thick amber liquid. When she took a sip, it seemed to be some sort of thick fruit juice, both bitter and sweet, cut with water and sweetened with honey. Its taste soaked through her tired body.

“Now then, where should we begin…?”

“Do you know about everything, Prince Takaihito?”

“For the most part, I would say. I do not know the feelings that beat in a person’s chest, so I wouldn’t say I understand it all.”

Takaihito said, glancing over toward Miyo.

“…We’ve caused you much pain. The Usubas, the Saimoris—because of my father, the path they were meant to follow was sent into disarray.”

His words didn’t really click for Miyo.

Takaihito’s father was the emperor. Putting aside the Usubas and their bargain with the emperor, what did he mean by saying the Saimoris had been led astray as well? Furthermore, what in the world did he mean when he said that “we’ve” caused her pain?

Kiyoka seemed slightly hesitant to speak up.

“In other words, and forgive me for my irreverent phrasing, the mastermind behind everything…was actually the emperor?”

“That would indeed be so. Truly a disgrace.”

It was utterly preposterous to claim the emperor had been behind it all. The scale was so impossibly large that it was difficult to suddenly accept.

Takaihito fiddled with the sake cup in his hands as he looked far off into the distance.

“Father was especially fearful of the Gift of Dream-Sight. Ever since he was crown prince.”

The supernatural ability of Dream-Sight could even surpass the Gift of Divine Revelation, depending on the degree of skill and talent the user possessed.

Both Kiyoka and Miyo had heard as much at the Usuba estate.

The emperor had been gripped with a sense of danger for a long time—if Divine Revelation was inferior to Dream-Sight, wouldn’t both he and his family be ousted from their position?

“But as long as no one was born with Dream-Sight, it posed no threat to him. Even if Father did fear the Usubas, I doubt he thought to actually do anything about it. But then, Sumi Usuba was born to the family.”

With her awakening to the Gift of Telepathy, the Usubas eagerly anticipated that her child may be born with Dream-Sight.

But from the emperor’s perspective, it was almost as if his anxieties of a possible Dream-Sight Gift-user had manifested and attacked him. His fears were suddenly tinged with a sense of reality.

Miyo couldn’t believe it.

Had something from so long ago really all connected back to this recent incident?

“It is likely Father schemed to weaken the Usubas’ power even further.”

Basically, even if a Gift-user with Dream-Sight was born, they wouldn’t pose a threat while the Usuba family was on the verge of ruin. The power of the Usubas had already been plenty suppressed, but the emperor still considered it insufficient.

Kiyoka’s eyes widened slightly in surprise.

“In that case, the period of economic slump for Tsuruki Trading—”

“Does indeed seem to be my father’s doing, yes. He used his influence behind the scenes to ensure business went poorly for Tsuruki Trading. Thoroughly, at that.”

“And because of that, the Usuba family fell on hard times and could barely support themselves, is that it?”

“It would seem so.”

The Usuba family was pushed to the brink of extinction just as the emperor had hoped. But that wasn’t enough to satisfy him.

“On top of this, Father feared Sumi Usuba would marry another member of the Usuba family and produce a child thick with Usuba blood.”

“He was worried that the more Usuba blood the child had, the stronger the power of Dream-Sight in the child would be?”

“At the very least, my father seemed to think as much. Hence, he needed to obstruct her from marrying a member of her clan.”

However, the emperor was not foolish enough to link the Usuba bloodline to a family completely without supernatural abilities. Then

along came the Saimoris, who were almost entirely lacking in Gift-users, and whose fall from nobility was clearly on the horizon.

"The emperor disclosed the power of Dream-Sight to the Saimoris, passed them a heavy sum, and incited them into pursuing Sumi Usuba. All that mattered was separating the woman from her family; he couldn't care less whether the Usubas recovered or faded away thereafter. Or perhaps it was all premeditated from the start. I can't say for sure… Though he is my father, I cannot help being impressed by his vindictiveness."

"Yoshirou Usuba told us they didn't know where the money had come from. So you're saying that was because it was from His Majesty…"

From the Saimoris' perspective, the arrangement was nothing but beneficial.

They gained money and a valuable bloodline, and since the proposal had been handed down from the emperor himself, anyone would think they had no other choice but to comply.

"From there, it is as you both already know."

Sumi Usuba married Shinichi Saimori and gave birth to Miyo. Then, her Gift of Dream-Sight was concealed, so everyone besides Sumi was convinced she lacked powers… Even the emperor himself.

Takaihito broke off, poured himself some more cold sake, and gulped it down.

"I think I get the gist of it. When Miyo was ousted from the Saimori estate, the seal on her abilities broke, and His Majesty also became aware of the Gift she possessed. Was I the target of the Burial Grounds incident, then?"

Kiyoka sighed as he spoke before draining the remaining sake in his cup.

“Indeed,” Takaihito confirmed, turning his thin lips up in the shape of a crescent moon.

“With your marriage arrangement finalized, Father added you as one of his targets. The way he saw it, the Kudous being joined with the power of Dream-Sight posed the greatest threat of all. Releasing the seal on the Burial Grounds was a ploy to physically distance you both and to lay the blame for the incident on the Special Anti-Grotesqueries Unit and force it from its position of power. And if things played out just right, he would have sought your death, too.”

“…I was actually in danger of just that. But why did he force Arata Usuba to cooperate with his plan?”

“He was simply using him temporarily to separate the two of you, nothing more. Though I am sure he also envisioned he could skillfully create friction between the Usubas and Kudous to encourage their mutual destruction.”

Miyo still felt as if something wasn’t right.

As she listened to Takaihito’s explanation, she couldn’t help getting the impression that the emperor seemed to be awfully anxious. It felt as if he was aiming to kill two, even three, birds with one stone.

Everyone present appeared to have the same sense that something didn’t add up.

“You are right. My father was panicking… I would ask that the next part not leave this terrace.”

“……?”

“My father, the reigning emperor, has already lost his Divine Revelation.”

Stunned silence fell over them all.

Possessing Divine Revelation was a necessary qualification for being emperor. If he had already lost it, it would go beyond a simple imperial family scandal.

No one here could breathe a word of this information to anyone else.

“He is also very sick; even getting out of bed is difficult for him. He simply passes his days sprawled out on the floor.”

His Divine Revelation was lost, and his body was withering away.

It was only natural he would panic. He was on the brink of losing both his status and his life.

“As abdication cannot be sanctioned, my father will not be stepping down from the throne for the time being. Regarding Divine Revelation, the only choice is to have me serve in his stead.”

Miyo suddenly recalled what her cousin had said.

At the time, Arata had said that the emperor had contacted him and told Arata that the Special Anti-Grotesqueries Unit would have their hands full with his Divine Revelation. It made sense, as even if the emperor had lost his Divine Revelation, he had been the one pulling the strings anyway. Everything all fit into place.

At the same time, it became clear that Arata hadn’t told her the truth about any of it.

“…Um.”

Miyo spoke up suddenly, and both Kiyoka and Takaihito turned their eyes toward her.

“Prince Takaihito.”

“Hmm. What is it, then?”

She put down her glass, its contents having grown completely lukewarm.

Miyo didn't understand complex conversations like this one. She assumed that she didn't fully comprehend certain elements of everything they had discussed up until that point, either. However, there was something she absolutely had to say.

"…Will there be any punishment for the Usuba family or my cousin?"

"Punishment, you say?"

"Yes. My cousin made a deal with His Majesty and acted according to his command. But in the end, he went against those orders and cooperated to help me… That would be treason, wouldn't it…?"

The emperor would retain his position until his demise. That meant he would continue to hold authority. The fact that Arata hadn't followed his orders wouldn't change.

"That is true," Takaihito agreed.

"The Usubas aren't at fault. I was simply being selfish and forced them to act on my behalf, so please…please…"

"I understand."

The beautiful imperial prince, with his well-sculpted face, chuckled softly.

"There is no need to worry; neither you nor your line have committed any crime. The Usubas are clearly the victims in all of this. Victims of my father's egotistical machinations. Moreover, it would be the height of foolishness to punish the injured party and harm such a precious bloodline in the process. Quite a ridiculous proposition, would you not agree?"

"B-but if the emperor doesn't pardon us—"

"Stay your fears. It will not be long before I am officially made crown prince. Soon, everything will be laid on my shoulders, the emperor's duties included. Under the pretext of his recuperation, all

communication from the outside world has been cut off from my father, so he is unable to do a thing.”

There would be no punishment.

Since the imperial prince himself had declared it, Miyo heaved a sigh of relief.

Just then, however, Kiyoka interjected.

“I think it’s obvious that the Usubas won’t be charged with anything, but for His Majesty…he’s effectively been confined to his quarters. Isn’t there a chance people who are unhappy with this arrangement will come forward?”

“Hmm. A few of the people in the know have indeed expressed those sentiments.”

“All the more reason—”

“Kiyoka. Though it may seem otherwise, this latest incident has made my blood boil.”

Instantly, an iciness radiated from Takaihito, which made both Miyo and Kiyoka—even Ookaito—swallow hard.

“Innocent civilians were meaninglessly sacrificed because of my father’s self-serving actions. There can be no country without the people, yet he forgot this truth and made light of them to serve his selfish desires. Anyone capable of such madness has no right to continue sitting on the throne.”

Miyo saw fierce anger in Takaihito’s gaze as he made his judgments clear.

However, in a blink of an eye, he concealed that fire, shifting back to his pleasant smile from before as he stood up.

“Forgive me. It seems I let myself get too heated. It is time for me to leave.”

“Allow me to see you off.”

“Hmm. Should a host leave his guests behind, Ookaito?”

“No need to worry. I will return afterward.”

“Then I accept your offer.”

Ookaito followed closely after Takaihito.

After taking a few steps forward, the beautiful prince turned back toward Miyo and Kiyoka, who were both speechless.

“I am delighted we were able to talk this evening. Let us meet again.”

“Yes. I promise.”

Next to Kiyoka, Miyo silently bowed.

EPILOGUE

The fish sizzled as it grilled.

When she took off the lid of the warm pot, the fragrance of miso soup rode the escaping steam to fill the kitchen.

Freshly cooked rice and a miso soup composed of Japanese ginger and tofu. Placing the aromatic dried mackerel that had just finished cooking on the plate, she garnished it with glossy and beautiful-colored boiled taro, added some of her homemade pickles, and placed them on the serving table.

At the same time, she filled a large lunch box with side dishes.

She had challenged herself to cook one of these “croquettes” that were en vogue, and they had turned out pretty well.

All done.

After quickly glancing over the finished breakfast and lunch box, she carried the serving table into the living room.

Yurie was off again today.

Since she wasn’t getting any younger and Miyo had grown fully accustomed to life in the house, they had started asking Yurie to come later in the day as a way of giving her more time off.

While Miyo thought she might be dismayed because of the loss in wages when they broke the news, Yurie instead said, “My, how both Miss Miyo and the young master have grown.” If anything, she’d been happy about the arrangement, as though the two were her own children setting off on their own.

“Good morning, Kiyoka.”

“Morning.”

Kiyoka wasn't wearing his military jacket, reading the newspaper in just his shirt.

It was the same scene as every morning. The Kudou household had completely returned to its everyday routine.

"Breakfast is ready."

"Looks delicious as always."

When he brought his eyes up from the paper, Kiyoka's broad smile was so enchanting that it flustered her.

As Miyo stuttered and avoided his gaze, he took the serving table out of her hands.

"Time to eat."

"Oh, uh, of course."

The two of them clapped their hands together, gave their thanks for the food, and brought the freshly prepared breakfast to their lips.

"This taro is amazing."

"Really? I'm glad to hear it."

"…That's right, today's when Sis comes over, right?"

"Ah, yes, it is."

Her sessions with Hazuki had decreased in frequency, but she was still continuing with her lessons. They were only two or three times a week, but she enjoyed the time she spent learning about new things, and she was happy to chat with Kiyoka's sister.

"Must be fun."

"Huh?"

"Your face. You're beaming."

Miyo reflexively put her hands on her cheeks, but she couldn't really tell herself.

Seeing her reaction, Kiyoka let out a small chuckle.

"Ah well, it's fine either way. Just don't push yourself."

"I absolutely won't."

"Really? Then go ahead."

At that point, Miyo had learned that nothing good came from pushing herself too hard.

Nothing was more precious to her than their daily life, the time they spent idly chatting with each other over a meal.

For some reason, her nightmares had ceased as of late. Miyo wondered if it was because she had awakened to her Gift.

Whatever the reason, she was glad that she hadn't given up at that pivotal moment. Instead, she'd chosen this house—chosen Kiyoka—for herself. She was glad she had done something. Miyo was truly grateful that she hadn't lost this routine of theirs for good.

"Have a nice day."

Once breakfast was finished, Miyo saw Kiyoka off. He was fully dressed in his military garb.

A slight chill hung in the morning air, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The classic early autumn weather made her conscious of the changing seasons.

She got the impression it had been scorching hot just a few days ago, but the passage of time seemed to have sped up ever since she'd arrived at the house.

"I'm off. I'll be back in the evening, but… Give Sis my regards."

"Okay. Oh, Kiyoka."

“What?”

“Your hair tie is loose. Crouch down and I’ll do it again for you.”

“Thanks, sorry.”

He stooped down, and she tightly retied the loosening cord.

The purple hair tie she’d gifted him was serving its purpose on yet another occasion. Kiyoka wore it every day, so she had secretly resolved to make him a new one.

“I’m finished.”

“Thanks, I app—”

“Hnh!”

She gasped.

“……”

“……”

Kiyoka had casually turned around to bring his face far closer to hers than she’d expected. Close enough to feel each other’s breath on their cheeks, the tips of their noses almost touching.

The pair both stayed stock-still, at a loss for words.

Miyo’s heartbeat pounded in her ears.

Surprised at the unexpected turn of events, she stiffened up. She couldn’t even lift a finger.

They both simply stared at one another. But why did she feel so on edge?

“Miyo.”

Kiyoka slowly brought up his hand and touched her cheek. Then—

“Ahem!”

Suddenly, the sound of someone clearing their throat interrupted them.

Both Kiyoka and Miyo had been off in their own world, so they practically jumped up before automatically putting some space between each other.

Now she felt too awkward and embarrassed to look at Kiyoka's face. She averted her eyes.

"Pardon me. Standing here silently watching you two was a bit too much to bear."

To their surprise, the person walking up from the street as he spoke was none other than Miyo's cousin, Arata Usuba. He'd been the one to interrupt them.

Sporting his high-quality suit and usual disarming smile, Arata was the same clean-cut, handsome young man as ever.

"Arata. What are you doing here…?"

"Good to see you again. Though I suppose it hasn't been that long, really. Hello, Miyo."

It had been over a month since the day Kiyoka regained consciousness, and she hadn't heard a word from the Usubas since.

Takaihito had told her not to worry, but that had been in regard to the emperor's punishment. The question of whether or not the Usuba family as a whole would be penalized for Arata's violation of their code of conduct was a different matter entirely.

She had been told the consequences for breaking their rules was severe, so she'd been wondering about how he was holding up.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't act like you just saw a ghost," he said, shrugging. "Just look at all the energy I have."

“I mean, um, I was worried, since I thought maybe you were punished somehow.”

“I was. Voluntary house arrest, for about three weeks.”

“Voluntary?”

He must have meant he’d shut himself away on his own. That wasn’t quite what she’d imagined.

“That’s right. Well, a lot happened in the end. But everything ended up involving the Gift of Dream-Sight, and Prince Takaihito himself went out of his way to visit our home to say he would try rethinking our family’s current way of life. I think there’ll be changes to our code before long, too.”

“I see.”

Their current regulations did strike her as a bit strict. It was only natural that, just as society and the laws continued to change with the times, the rules imposed on their family would change, too.

In contrast to Miyo’s look of relief at understanding the situation, Kiyoka’s gaze was ice cold.

“Well, what did you come here for?”

“Please don’t get mad. I wouldn’t just swing by without a proper reason.”

“And I’m asking what that is.”

His brusqueness was a clear indication he considered Arata a nuisance.

The obvious impatience her fiancé showed made Miyo tilt her head. Did Kiyoka really despise Arata so thoroughly?

“Shouldn’t you be getting to work, Commander Kudou? You’re going to be late.”

“You think I can go off and leave you two behind like this?”

“I don’t have a problem with that.”

“Well, *I* do.”

For some reason, sparks were flying between the two men.

“Quite the worrywart, aren’t we? I simply came to make a proposal.”

When he heard Arata’s words, a deep wrinkle carved itself into Kiyoka’s brow.

“What kind of proposal?”

“Let’s see. To put it bluntly… Will you hire me as Miyo’s bodyguard?”

“Huh?!”

“What did you say?”

Miyo let out a gasp, which was quite atypical for her.

To be fair, anyone would be astonished to suddenly hear someone offer their services as a bodyguard.

“I think it’s a pretty good idea myself. From here on out, Miyo will have to get on well with her Dream-Sight. There could be scoundrels out there who want to abuse that power for themselves. You spend a lot of time away from her because of work, don’t you? Even if it’s only for when you’re not there, wouldn’t you say it’d be helpful to have someone around who could protect her?”

“……”

“Plus, I’m Miyo’s cousin, so you don’t have to worry about anything vulgar happening with me at her side, right? Well? I’d say those are pretty good terms, wouldn’t you?”

“But what about your career? You’re a negotiator, aren’t you?”

“My job affords me a fair bit of freedom. I don’t actually work for any particular company in the first place, and I really only accept negotiating gigs if they strike my fancy.”

Ever the salesman, Arata had smoothly laid out all the benefits of the arrangement and given them the impression that there were no drawbacks at all.

“I’ll think about it. I’m reserving my answer for now.”

“Suit yourself. Normally, I’d have you decide things on the spot, but I get the feeling if I did that, you’d only dislike me even more.”

“You’d be right.”

Watching the two exchange terse words, Miyo was relieved that things appeared to be ending peacefully.

Just then, the sound of an automobile engine drew closer. It was the car belonging to the main Kudou residence with Hazuki in tow.

“Well, now,” Hazuki commented after stepping out from the automobile.

“If it isn’t Miyo’s cousin. You’re here, too?”

“Hello. My name is Arata. I’d prefer if you’d use my name.”

“Really now? Then, in that case, feel free to use mine, too.”

Hazuki and Arata genially exchanged words.

“Great, another loudmouth.” Kiyoka sighed, putting a hand on his forehead with a haggard look of exhaustion on his face.

A thought struck Miyo.

What sort of words did the wives of the world offer their husbands at times like these? Or what sort of things did they say to console them? Unfortunately, she was not privy to such information.

Nevertheless, as his betrothed, she felt a bit reluctant to see Kiyoka off as drained as he was. When push came to shove, it was the wife's job, after all, to support her husband in his personal life.

Something that'll make Kiyoka happy… Something that'll cheer him up. It's no use. I haven't got a clue.

Though Miyo didn't know what to do, she was keenly aware from firsthand experience that if she didn't demonstrate her feelings somehow, nothing would happen.

O-okay then.

Her mind made up, Miyo whispered quietly to her fiancé.

"Kiyoka. Um, could you kneel down for me one more time?"

"Hmm? Ah, like this?"

She reached out to his lowered head. Then she gently placed her hand there and tried moving it—in other words, Miyo was patting Kiyoka's head at the moment.

Actually, hold on. Are grown men happy to get stroked on the head?

She slowly grew worried about Kiyoka, who had fallen into silence and abruptly widened his eyes.

Children were obviously thrilled to be patted on the head, and Miyo herself felt incredibly warm inside just from Kiyoka lightly tapping on hers. So it stood to reason, then… Well, that was what she'd thought, but it was possible she had gotten a few things wrong.

"Kiyoka?"

"…Miyo."

"Yes?"

He mumbled to her as he stared vacantly at something off in the distance.

“Why’d you—why’d you choose that?”

“Huh? Uh, well, I don’t know if I, um, chose it, but…I thought maybe if I did this, you’d, um, you’d cheer up a bit… Oh, d-do you not like it? I’m s-sorry.”

“I don’t mind it.”

Miyo abruptly removed her hand, but he immediately grabbed hold of it and drew her entire body toward him.

Oh…

Something soft touched her forehead.

But it was truly for just a brief moment; before she could understand what was going on, he had already released his grip on her hand.

Still unclear about what exactly had happened, she brought a hand to her forehead. There, she thought she could feel a slight warmth left behind.

“That did cheer me up. I’ll be off, then.”

“Y-yes, of course… Have a nice day…”

Miyo watched Kiyoka dash off jauntily, a refreshed and cheerful smile on his face.

As Miyo stood there in a daze, both Hazuki and Arata watched over her together, huge grins across their faces.

❦ *AFTERWORD* ❦

It's good to see you all again. I am the writer who achieved notoriety following the sale of Volume 1 for her difficult-to-write/difficult-to-read/hard-to-remember in Japanese pen name, Akumi Agitogi.

I am deeply relieved that I was able to safely deliver Volume 2 of *My Happy Marriage* to you, the readers.

That's because I set up the narrative so that the truth behind the leftover mysteries in Volume 1 would never be revealed without a second! In that regard, I wager that I must have made all of you very impatient and anxious. I am truly glad I was given the opportunity to continue writing this story…

With that being said, this volume's story covered Miyo and Kiyoka's discovery of why exactly the situation in the first volume came about. What did you all think? Deep down, I myself am a nervous mess. This volume, which could be considered an "answer" to the mysteries in the first, brought the fantastical elements of Gifts and the like to the forefront, and I'm trembling in fear as I write this, wondering whether all of you will appreciate that shift or not…

While I do think there may be some of you out there who might also be reading the web novel version, for the print edition of this volume, I made some seriously substantial and dramatic revisions. I cut back on a lot of the more byzantine explanatory sections (yes, they are *reduced*) from the web novel, and I feel that the characters' emotions are a lot easier to understand now.

Speaking of web versions, Square Enix's Gangan Online app features the ongoing (as of July 2019) manga version of the story,

drawn by Rito Kousaka. The high-quality polish of the manga version is superb, so be sure to check it out!

Now, to my editor, whom I inconvenienced at every turn, even more so than with Volume 1: I am truly grateful for your help. I'm sorry for being such a handful to deal with. I'll be more careful.

To Tsukiho Tsukioka, who drew the cover illustration: Your piece was so gorgeous that I almost rushed out to frame it and hang it up on my wall as soon as I laid eyes on it. I thank you for it.

Finally, to all of you, the readers, holding this book in your hands: I was able to continue writing this story thanks to your support and encouragement. I am truly grateful to you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you so much.

May we meet yet again.

Akumi Agitogi

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